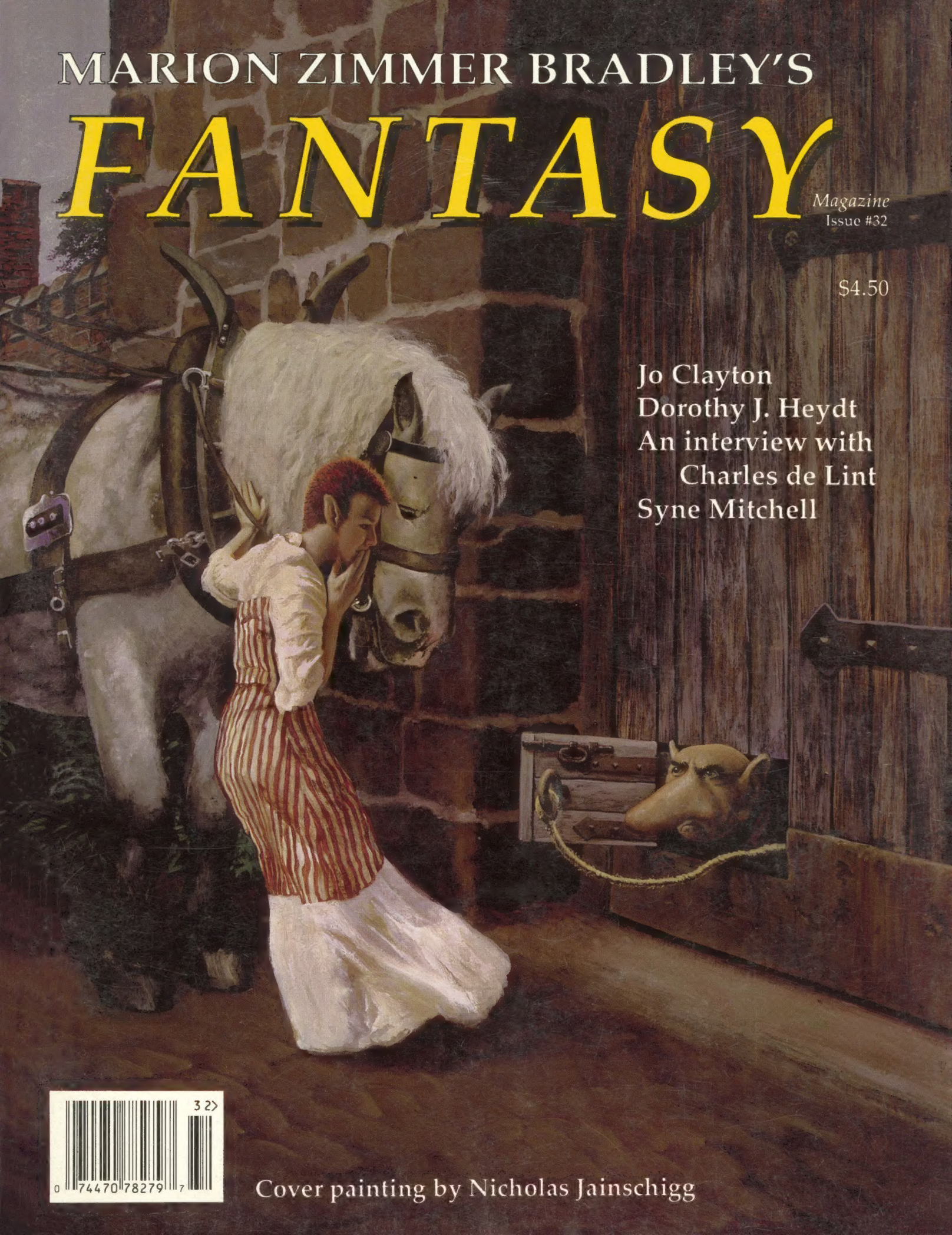
MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S
FANTASY
Magazine
Issue #32
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Dorothy J. Heydt
An interview with
Charles de Lint
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MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S
FANTASY
Magazine

EDITORIAL

One thing that never fails to astonish me is that people don't seem to believe my guidelines. I ask for short stories, and set a clear word limit, and again and again people send in long ones which would only be usable as cover stories.

The hard fact is that cover stories must be done by pre-arrangement, and are normally requested from "name" authors — which implies at least one novel in print, or a very good record of short-story sales. If you think you fall in this category, write to me or to Rachel, describing the story you want to do, and we'll discuss it. We're usually backed up for several issues on cover stories, but we're always hurting for something — how often do I need to repeat it? — short and funny. We can always make room for something short and humorous — not slapstick as in ***The Three Stooges*** — but subtly humorous or mildly satirical. Everybody who has seen me giggling over some of our humorous stories can't doubt my sense of humor, but I walked out of the theatre where the supposedly funny remake of ***THE MARK OF ZORRO*** was playing. I am not too amused by slapstick, clowning, or silliness, but I am always amused by good humor, as in John D. MacDonald, Dorothy L. Sayers, or any other amusing mystery writer.

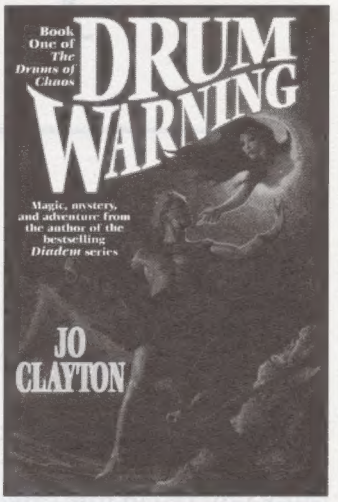
People also fail to believe my rules about no epics, no poetry, and except in very special cases, no series. If you want to do a series, be prepared to sell me each story as an independent, stand-alone work. I *will* buy them that way — witness the stories by Jo Clayton and Dorothy J. Heydt in this issue, which feature continuing characters. I'm still eagerly awaiting more of Laura Underwood's stories about her enchanted harp. One advantage to making the stories stand by themselves is that if I don't happen to buy them, you may sell them to one of the new anthologies that have sprung up in imitation of **SWORD AND SORCERESS** and are bursting out all over. But don't tell me that your story is part of a series — or send me a whole set of them in a lump. If the story can't stand on its own two feet, I won't buy it; and if it can, I don't need to know about the rest.

And if you want to write a novel, go right ahead; they're still selling in paperback and even in hardcover. But don't write me long letters about your unwritten books; send me something I can print. Then when we meet at some convention, you can buy me a drink and tell me the plots of all your unwritten epics. I can't promise to suggest a market for each of them — but I'll listen (if you can keep me awake) and give you my best advice. And please don't send me chunks of your novel trying to pass themselves off as short stories. Almost by definition, a good novel chapter will make a bad short story, and a good short story will make a bad novel chapter.

For me, start small and remember: the only secret about writing is just to sit down and do it. Don't talk about it or write long letters or diaries about it; put the energy in your story. It's not easy to break into writing — much more difficult than when I started — but all you need to risk is a pencil and notebook, or a typewriter from a hock shop. And if you have a computer, you're halfway there already. (And if you read the guidelines, make that "three-quarters".)

Marion Zimmer Bradley

TOR BOOKS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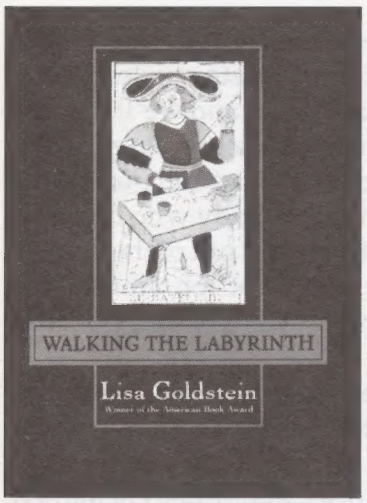

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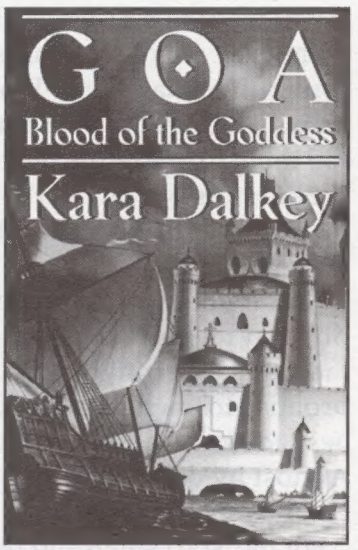

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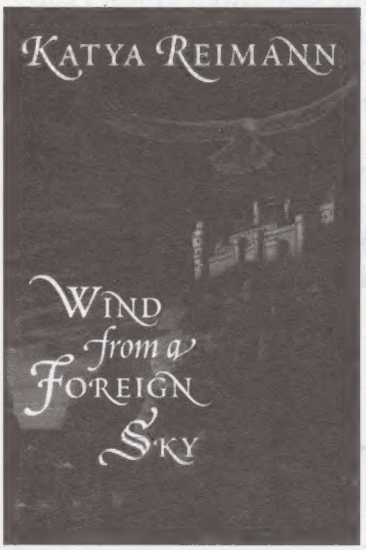

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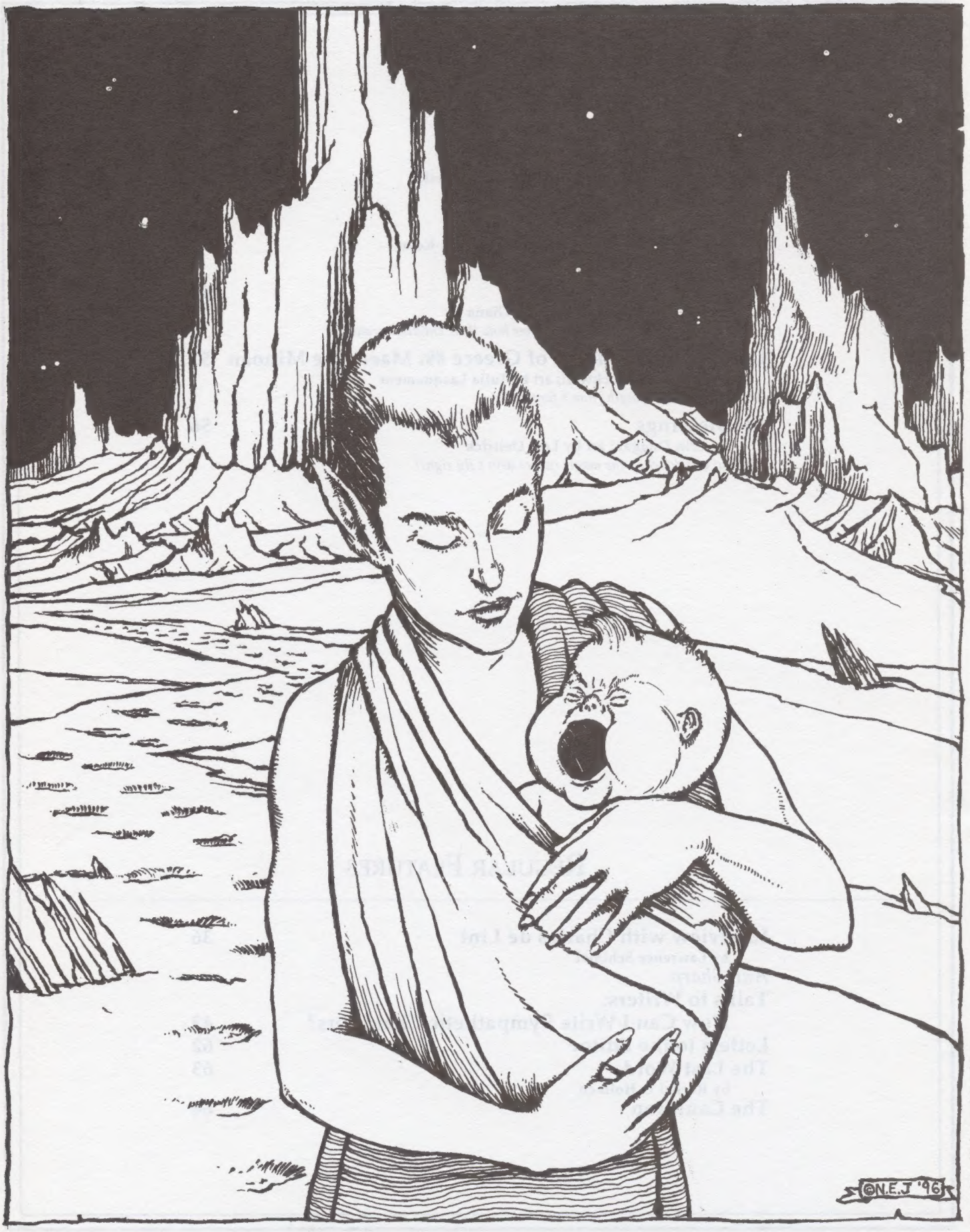


Artwork by Nicholas Jainschigg

Fox Maid's Travail

by Jo Clayton

As the van reached the end of the pass and started down the rutted trail, Arakney made a faint shapeless sound, dropped the reins and started to roll off the driver's bench.

Yohn was riding stretched out along the van's flat top, the crisp breeze tickling at her short russet curls. Earlier in the day she'd run on fox feet beside the caravan, but now she lay with her chin propped on her fists, staring out at the wide, rolling plain below.

Despite the rumble of the wheels, the jingles and creaks of the harness, she heard the soft exhalation, caught the movement in the corner of her eyes, scrambled over the front edge onto the bench and caught the old woman before she fell under the wheels.

As she struggled to keep Arakney on the seat, she saw the reins slide over the footboard and felt Dapple start moving faster as the van tilted onto a steeper downslope. "Piri!"

The Osuni came through the curtains behind the driver's bench, a small creature, brown and wrinkled, like one of those peach pit monkeys fathers carved for their children's entertainment. "What?"

"K'ney dropped the reins. Get us stopped." Yohn's voice was edged with impatience. Why didn't he see what was happening and do something?

"Oh." He climbed over the backrest, reached under the seat and set the dragbrake, squatted where he was as the van rolled slowly to a stop. Dapple stood whuffling and pawing a little, looking back at them, his head on his shoulder, worry wrinkles above his eyes.

"Don't just sit there. Help me. We need to get her in the back."

Piri blinked at her as if the words had to ripen in his mind before he understood them. "Oh."

They laid her out on the pallet where Piri had been dozing. Yohn covered her with a blanket and knelt beside her looking down at her. The strong face that was usually full of amusement at the idiocies of the world had gone blank as if the woman behind it had left for another place. Even the thick white braid looked limp.

Yohn found the pulse point under Arakney's jaw, then held her hand over the old woman's lips. "Her heart's going strong and she's breathing well enough. Piri, what's wrong with her?"

"Don't know."

"Could she just be sickening from something?" She set her hand on Arakney's brow. "No fever."

He shook his head very slowly as if it took an effort to remember how to do that. "We don't get fluxes or agues." His voice dragged.

"Well, we can't do anything for her up here away from everybody. Do you know this land, Piri?"

He wasn't listening to her any more. He was rocking back and forth, his hands moving as if he held his flute between them, his eyes fixed on Arakney.

Yohn looked with exasperation from one to the other. "Djannum!"

She crawled through the curtains, retrieved the reins, eased off on the brake and got Dapple going. The road had to go somewhere and anywhere was better than here.

The day was almost over by the time she reached a crossroads with a signpost, the first evidence she had that anybody lived in these parts.

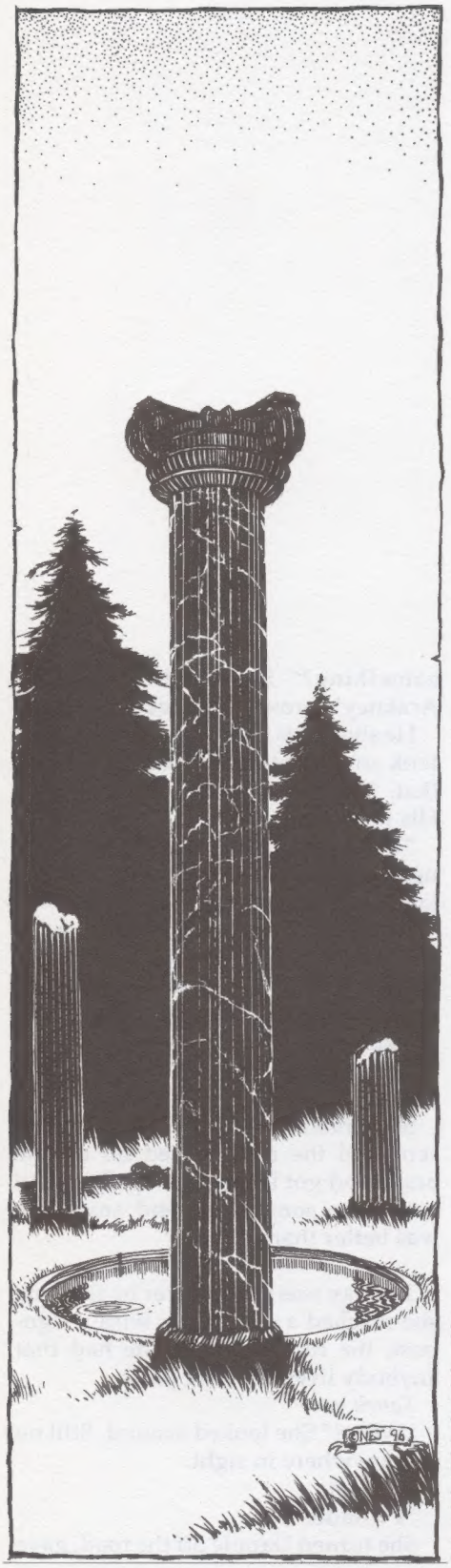
Touch me.

"What?" She looked around. Still no one anywhere in sight.

Touch me.

"I wonder ..."

She turned Dapple off the road, gave



Artwork by Nicholas Jainschigg

him some water, then a nosebag with a few mouthfuls of oats and left him chewing placidly while she went over to the arrow boards and touched the blobs of black paint on the one pointing north.

Scandary.

She touched the south arrow.

Frittery.

She touched the east arrow, the continuation of the road they were on.

Malavory.

They were musical names, all of them, exotic, interesting, but there was nothing to tell her how far off these towns were, no reason to choose one above the other.

She searched through her pockets and found a pennybit. "Odd out does it."

The sun was setting and Frittery was dark against the red of the sky, a walled town, its gates shut for the night, built on the bend of a river she'd already crossed half a dozen times.

When she pulled the bell rope, three heads popped over the top of the wall. They might have been brothers they were so alike — pale faces with a dusting of freckles across the nose and cheeks, pale eyes, hair they pulled up and tied at the very top of their heads, the ends spraying out stiffly, like a thistle bloom only lemon yellow instead of purple.

"Will you let me enter please?" she said and was not startled to hear strange sounds coming from her mouth. It was that kind of land. "I need help for my Mama and my cousin. Please?" Arakney was not her mother, nor Piri her cousin, but she thought it safer to claim them as kin.

"Oh," one of the heads said. "How sad. Your mother is sick?"

"I don't know. I can't wake her up. Help me."

"You're very young to be on your own like that," another of the heads told her. "Would you like some bread? We can toss some down to you."

"But we can't open the gates," the third head said.

"No, we can't do that. Not until the Town Council meets and gives permission."

"And they won't meet till tomorrow noon."

"And they probably won't let you in then."

"It's the truth, little girl."

"They don't move very fast and they don't like changing things."

"So it's better if you just go away."

"Because we can't open the gates while you're still there and that'll make trouble with the farmers and their market."

"It's really better if you just go away."

"We don't want to have to make you go. But we will."

"So why not be polite and do the right thing."

They kept talking and talking at her until she was drowning in their chatter and her mind had gone as numb as Piri's. Fighting back tears she was determined not to let them see, she turned Dapple and went back along the road until she reached the last of the river bridges she'd crossed to come here. She made camp there, flogging her weary body to clean Arakney, make soup from the dried meat and roots in the store bins, scold Piri into eating his soup, spoon as much of it as she could into Arakney, rub down Dapple, feed him more grain and stake him out to graze for the night. When she crawled into her blankets she was so tired she was asleep before she tucked herself in.

The next set of coin tosses sent her along the east road, heading for Malavory.

The folk of Malavory town didn't wait for her to knock on their gates, didn't even wait for her to reach the town, but came pouring out, waving an assortment of spears and clubs, making a sound that she heard as a low, hostile roar. They were a short and very hairy lot. She would have taken them for cousin weres from the look alone, except she couldn't feel anything either cousinly or wereish about them.

She stopped Dapple, climbed up on the bench, cupped her hands about her mouth and shouted, "I don't mean trouble, I just want help for my mother. We can pay."

A spear arced away from the mob and landed beside Dapple, its head lodged in the pounded dirt of the road, its shaft quivering. The muttering roar grew suddenly louder and formed into words she could understand. "Go away. Go away. GO AWAY."

Yohn stopped at the crossroads and scowled at the sign. She took the pennybit from her pocket and flung it hard as she could away from her. "Only one place left to try and if it's like the

others, I don't know what we're going to do."

The afternoon was waning when she reached the first of the planted fields. There were neat rows of maize with beans planted in the same hill, then rows of melons and rows of yams. The weeds had been carefully pulled and earth raked around the plants. Whoever worked this land had a love for growing things and a lot of time to spend on them.

Her ears prickled. Someone was watching her.

By the time she stopped the van at the gate, her skin was prickling all over, but she'd seen none of the watchers. No matter how quickly or how slyly she turned her head, no one was there. She patted the shoulder of the weary horse, stalked to the gate and pounded her fist on it.

A head popped up over the parapet. A one-eyed man — born that way, one single eye in the center of his forehead. "What you want with us?"

"My Mama's sick and so's my cousin, we're almost out of food and grain for the horse. We can pay. We're not asking for charity."

"Why did you come here?"

"Because Frittery wanted to talk me to death and Malavory was ready to use clubs. Where else could I go?"

The one eye blinked slowly, then the head was gone.

A moment later a small door cut into the gate cracked open. A set of eyes down around knee level stared up at her. A huge honker of a nose twitched and sucked in a gust of air, then eyes and nose were gone. The door slammed shut.

"Girl."

She looked up. One Eye was back. "You a were? Kort says you smell like fox."

"So? My Mama taught me manners. I'm not going to shift in the middle of the street and scare the children."

It seemed to be the right answer because a moment later the gate swung open enough to let her lead Dapple through it and into a street crowded with Scandaries staring at her.

No two of them were alike. Some were small as dogs, some had dog muzzles and big warm near-sighted brown eyes, some were tall and thin, some tall and broad, some looked rather like insects, some had beaks like birds and she could swear she saw feathers — soft and curly, but feathers for all that. Many had a strange assortment of limbs, whether four arms or three legs or some other improbable combination. One had a single leg and hopped along with a surprising agility. It was hard to know how to act. Staring seemed impolite, but not looking at anyone might make them think she was shifty and dangerous. And should she comment or just ignore the whole thing?

A three-legged man with an odd tikitty walk came to meet her. He held up his hand to stop her, a hand almost shocking because it was so ordinary.

"Wel'ome oo Than'ary," he said. "I'm Erm the May'r." His curved tearing teeth did odd things to his pronunciation and made his wide grin a bit ambiguous, but he exuded a benevolence that almost cost her her composure. "You thay your mama ith thick?"

She started to say yes, but she could feel the hiss building up at the back of her tongue waiting to spray at him, so she just nodded.

"Thalet, Kort. Ta' her t' Ta'thot."

She recognized the nose on one of the little people who wriggled free of the crowd. His shoulders were as powerful as his nose was large and he had the usual number of arms and legs, they were just very short. The woman who followed him was a wisp, her limbs thin as reeds. Her eyes were huge and lime green with the slit pupils of a cat, her mouth a tiny pursed bud, her pointed chin sharp enough to bruise anything it touched. Translucent folds of skin fell from the underside of her arms and were also attached along the length of her body like the flight webs of a flying squirrel. She wore an odd garment that passed between her legs and buttoned at the shoulders but left her sides free. The folds of skin rippled as she walked.

She put her hand on the little man's arm and smiled at Yohn. "I'm Salet," she said. Her voice was very high; it made Yohn's ears itch. "And this is Kort. Tachot is our healer. She's really very good. If you'll follow us we'll take you to the Heal House."

Yohn glanced at Erm. He grinned again and nodded, so she led Dapple after her guides.

The Heal House was larger than she expected with a garden and lawns behind a tall fence made from woven laths. Inside the fence there were children everywhere, running, playing, tending the plants, as varied in their shapes and sizes as the adults. A large blonde woman was waiting in the fence's main gate. She had a matronly figure but a face still firm with few wrinkles and no obvious oddity except missing little fingers.

Yohn dipped into a quick curtsey. "My name is Yohn, my Mama is Arakney and my Cousin is Piri."

"Welcome to the Heal House, Yohn. Let's have your Mama brought in. She's in the back of the van?"

Tachot folded Arakney's hands on her diaphragm, then pulled the light blanket over her. "Your Mama does spells and other magic?"

"Yes." Yohn bent over Arakney, her lip caught between her teeth. In the light streaming through the large glass window, the old woman looked alarmingly frail. "What's wrong with her? Is she going to die?"

"As to dying, I don't know. As to what's wrong, I would guess she lost consciousness when you crossed into the Strachina. That's this land you're in now."

"If the Strachina begins at the end of the pass where the road starts down, then yes, that's when. Why didn't it happen to me? You know I'm were."

"You don't *do* magic, child. You *are* magic. This land is saturated with it and those who've handled it more than most are sometimes not able to deal with what we have here."

"Can you help her? I'll do anything you want if you just help her."

"I'll do what I can, don't worry about that. She is not the one who bore you, is she."

"No ... but ..."

"I understand. You've been taking good care of your Mama, you should be proud of that. It can't have been easy for one so young." She pushed at the fuzz of short yellow hairs that made a halo about her face. "It's almost time for supper. And I have my rounds to make. I'll send Salet in, she's stronger than she looks and she's good at caring for people. She can tell you about Scandary and what we do here. Mm. And Kort to help take care of your cousin. He might feel happier having a man tend him. As to helping your mother, I'll think on that."

Salet sat on the cot holding Arakney's head in her lap while Yohn got a spoonful of the rich meaty broth into the old woman. "There's an Evil," she said. "It

haunts the Strachina. We call it the Hoggar Vinj."

"Mm?" Yohn waited till she saw Arakney's throat muscles working, then she brought up the next spoonful.

"It's a big black cloud." Kort's gravelly voice sounded from the corner of the room where he was patiently persuading the Osuni to feed himself. "Filthy monster. Rolls along the ground, sucking in everything it touches, animals and people, the crops in the fields."

"The towns don't look like they've been nibbled on." One more spoonful down. Yohn scooped up more of the soup, grimaced as her hand trembled and she spilled a good bit of it before she slid the spoon between Arakney's lips.

"It can't come inside town walls," Salet said.

"Sal's right; there's something about so many people together that blocks it."

"But nobody can get out or in when the Vinj is around. Yohn, I think maybe if you put the bowl to your Mama's lips, you can get her to drink it that way and get more down her. Let me lift her head higher and let's try it." Salet slipped her frail hands beneath Arakney's head and lifted it.

Yohn set the spoon on the table beside the cot and held the bowl to Arakney's lips. For a moment nothing happened, then Arakney's mouth moved and she drank.

"There. That does work better, doesn't it. Next time I'll bring the soup in a mug so it'll be easier to handle. The Hoggar Vinj will stay around for days, pushing at the walls and howling. And it crawls inside your head. If you listen to it, it makes you do ... things ... you wouldn't even think other times. And having strangers around seems to call it. That's why Frittery and Malavory wouldn't let you inside their walls. You see, strangers put a double burden on them, first because they and their families will starve and second because of what it makes them do. It's an ugly thing, feeding a monster like that with people like you no matter how hard you lie to yourself about what it is you're doing."

Kort snorted, then he said, "Maybe so, Sal, but I think you're being too easy on 'em. I don't think it bothers them any more than stepping on a roach."

"We've been this road before, Kort. Just be quiet."

Yohn shivered. "Then it's going to come here. Come after me and Arakney and Piri."

"Yes."

Yohn set the soup bowl on the table and used a small hand towel to wipe the trickles of broth from Arakney's face. "Then why did Scandary let us in?"

"For one thing, we've learned how to drive it off. We had to learn."

"You've got that part right, Sal."

"I'm not talking to you, Kort. Yohn, taking people in is why we're here. The Hoggar Vinj has been here forever, or at least as long as memory runs. After a while no more outsiders came to the Strachina. You can see why they wouldn't. And the Hoggar Vinj got hungrier and hungrier. Tachot tells us about that time. There were some very lean and terrible years back then. Then someone in Frittery figured out that stranger doesn't have to mean outsider. Did you notice something odd about the folk you saw?"

"The Fritteries I saw looked like brothers. And the mob of Malavories could have been whelped in the same litter. Is that what you mean?"

Salet eased Arakney's head onto the pillow and slid off the cot. "Yes. A stranger these days is anybody who's different. There are a lot of us Oddities born in this land. Tachot says it's because even the air is saturated with magic. In Frittery and Malavory they take an Oddity from its mother as soon as they see what it is and lay it out on the grass for the Hoggar Vinj to come and take. Tachot and some others built this town a long and a long long time ago because they couldn't live with that. They gathered all the abandoned babies they could find before the Vinj got them and brought them to the Heal Hall and raised them to do the same. And so it has been ever since though it's hard now because the Fritteries and Malavories set crossbowmen on watch for us whenever there's a laying out." She moved to the door. "I'll be back later to help you wash your Mama. You'd best get some rest."

In the morning Tachot put her hand on Yohn's shoulder. "Come walk with me."

They left the Heal House and walked through the nearly empty town to the wall. When Yohn stepped from the ladder onto the walkway behind the parapet, she saw where everyone was — out in the fields, a horde of people moving like locusts through the fields, digging up, plucking, cutting down.

Tachot nodded at the workers. "The Hoggar Vinj will be on us soon. We're saving what we can while there's time." She touched Yohn's shoulder again. "Stop here, Yohn. You can see what I want to show you." She leaned on the parapet and looked out at the foothills rising a short distance from the town.

Yohn chewed on her lip. "What if I took Arakney and Piri away from here? Got them out of the Strachina. Would they wake up?"

"You don't have time to try, Yohn. I'm sorry I have to tell you that, but it's true. Anyone the Hoggar Vinj finds alone is dead. I can feel it getting close. We're old enemies, you know. First there's the smell, like a garbage pit where everything's half rotted. Then the blackness comes oozing up out of the ground. It gets thicker and thicker. And the part of the Vinj you can't see infects people, quarrels start, when you look around, everyone seems ugly and sly, wanting what you have, plotting against you. We know how to drive it off, but it's very hard and it takes a while."

Tachot's voice dropped until it was so quiet it faded into the wind blowing past them up there on the wall and Yohn had to strain to hear her. "You had something to show me?"

"Ah. There's someone in the mountains who can help you, a person of power. If he will. If you can get to him alive. You'll have to run fast, little fox. And cleverly. There will be traps and tests along the way. I can't tell you what they'll be because they're always different. You don't have to go. You can wait till we drive off the Hoggar Vinj."

"How long before it gives up?"

"Twenty days, thirty. We have to blend, you see. We have to be of one mind and sometimes that's hard to do."

"Arakney could be dead by then."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not."

"How do I go?"

"Run directly west till you reach a place with three pillars of black marble, one whole, one broken in half and one broken in thirds. By those pillars there is a pool perfectly round with three goldfish swimming in it. Run round it three times starting on the north side and moving east then south. On the third time round you'll see a path lead-

ing into the trees. Follow that path and don't let it out of your sight or you'll never find it again."

When Yohn trotted from Scandary's open gates the stench hit her and she remembered what Tachot said. *A garbage pit where everything's half rotted.* She extended her stride and fled across the land as fast as she could run. In the corners of her eyes she could see wisps of black mist flowing out of the earth, in the hairs of her ears she caught sounds that were not yet words. By the time she saw the black pillars, though, the smell was only a taint on the wind.

On her third trip round the pool she came on a path that hadn't been there before, a ribbon of tan just wide enough to let her run comfortably along it. The last daylight vanished as she set her feet on the way.

Trees closed around her and she gave them a foxy grin. She knew moor and she knew forest far better than she knew towns. She went warily, though, for what Tachot said about tests was still loud in her ears and when she looked back, there wasn't any path at all, just shadows and dead leaves littering the ground. About half an hour later she heard snarling and low growls; an eddy in the wind blowing across the path brought her the scent of wolf. *Djannum!* She shifted back to two legs, took off her skirt and tied it round her neck. She ran at the nearest tree, a forest oak with wide spreading branches, jumped and caught hold of the lowest limb then scrambled up it until she could get a look at what lay ahead.

The trees opened out into a grassy glade with a stream cutting across the middle. Two young wolves were circling the carcass of a small deer, growling and threatening each other; as she watched, one of them leaped across the carcass and attacked the other, slamming into him, going for his throat. There was a flurry of brindle fur, then the fight broke off and they faced each other, heads down, legs stiff, thrusting their muzzles forward in quickly broken off feints. Yohn rubbed her nose. The whole thing was wrong. Wolves just didn't act like that. This was her first test.

The carcass of the deer lay right across the path. She had to get by somehow, though she had nothing to work with but the clothes she wore, a leather belt and a knife. And she couldn't go round, couldn't go back, because she'd lose the path. Frowning at the wolves, she untied the skirt from about her neck and shook it out, wondering if she could make a net out of it to trap them.

There was a heaviness in the left-side pocket.

She investigated and pulled out Arakney's Story Gourd. She didn't remember putting it there, but there it was. She looked at it a moment. "So who's fooling with what? Arakney, that you? Tachot? I suppose it doesn't matter."

She draped the skirt over the limb and began shaking the gourd. Words came into her head, a sleep spell Arakney had taught her. She began whisper-singing it over and over, winding the words through the shssh shssh of the gourd:

Toonci toonci kur ay thaven
Theeyu theeyu hay mou daven

The young wolves forgot their growling. They each took a step, lurched as if their legs had forgot how to bend, then stretched out, asleep.

Yohn wound the spell up, replaced the gourd in the pocket and slipped the skirt over her head, doing up the ties with a snap of satisfaction. She let herself fall off the branch, caught hold of it, then dropped to the ground and ran lightly along the path until she was on the eastern edge of the glade. She looked back.

It was almost funny, each wolf peacefully asleep, cuddled up against the other.

When she reached for the gourd so she could wake them, it was gone. She shrugged, used her breath to imitate the sound. "Sss sss sss," she went until she felt sure of the rhythm, then she sang, "Sovnibinaster!"

She shifted to fox and trotted along the path. There was silence behind her and a sense of calm. She was pleased with herself because the first test was finished and she thought it was finished well.

The path led to a river and anchorposts where there had once been a narrow bridge. In the light of the full moon the river beyond those posts was a stretch of whitewater tumbling down a steep slope, dashing against huge boulders.

She ran back and forth along the riverbank, always careful to keep the path in sight so it wouldn't disappear on her, but she couldn't find any way of crossing that water. Back at the

Artwork by Nicholas Jainschigg

anchorposts, she sat on her haunches and thought and thought till another thing that Arakney had said swam out of memory. *If you can't see a solution to a problem, then change where you stand.*

Girl-shaped again, she climbed as high as she could in a tall tree with red veined leaves and papery bark, then stretched out along a limb and looked through a gap in the foliage at the river.

Almost immediately she saw a pattern in the placement of certain boulders, black ones much darker than the spray wetted granite of the others. It was a zigzag pattern with the zigs and the zags short enough for a fox to leap, if she calculated the leaps very carefully and conserved her momentum until she reached the far side.

On the ground again and on four legs, she backed off a few paces then ran, jumped for the boulder, pushed off again without hesitation, the movements of landing flowing directly into the movements of launching. On the third leap, she was a hair short and nearly slid into the river but she scrambled frantically and clawed herself onto the boulder, launched herself again without pausing to catch her breath. Leap, land, launch. Over and over, twisting to follow the pattern burned into her brain. Over and over until she flung herself onto the far bank.

She lay panting for several moments, then she scrambled to her feet and with weary determination started on along the path.

When the moon was sliding onto the tips of the peaks ahead of her, she came to a vast table of stone, of twisted black pillars and lava pillows and broken stone bubbles with knife sharp edges. The tan path stopped where the lava began, but she could see squares of white stone marching across the black, marking the route.

Yohn fox stepped onto the lava, yelped and retreated as she felt the harsh abrasion of the stone.

She shifted, closed her eyes a moment. All this twitching from one form to the other was making her dizzy and draining her energy even further. "Fox can sleep a while, I need hands and maybe a voice, if I'm as close as I hope. Three pillars, three goldfish, three times round, maybe three tests." She took off her skirt and dropped to the ground, sitting firmly in the middle of the path so it wouldn't go away on her while she used her belt knife to cut the cloth into strips about as wide as her hand.

She knotted about half of the strips around her feet until they looked like a ragman's heap, tucked the remaining ones over her belt and jumped up. It was hard to stand. She was clumsy as a rag doll, but that didn't seem important when she remembered the rasp of that lava against her fox pads.

As she stepped from dirt to stone, she heard a hoarse cry and looked up. Three birds circled high overhead. She walked on. The birds circled lower; the sounds they made were harsher, uglier. Vultures. No mistaking them now. They cried out again and dived at her.

She flung herself aside, scrambled toward a pile of rocks, the rough stone tearing the skin on her knees and palms.

Something wet and stinking struck her head, her back. Again. Again. Then the birds were gone.

She sat up, wiped at her hair and gagged at the feel and the smell of what she touched. For a moment all she could do was crouch where she was, breathing through her mouth and gasping with distress. She wiped her hand across the stone until her skin burned, then got to her feet and went grimly onward.

By the time the moon was entirely gone, the cloth strips were worn through and her soles were beginning to bleed. She eased herself down, took the other strips from under her belt and tied them about her feet. The birds had splattered part of those too and she gagged again at the smell, but she tied them on anyway.

Somewhere not far away a baby began to cry, the thin uncertain wail of deep distress she knew from tending her younger brothers and sisters. She hesitated. Trap or test? If she left the path, would she ever find it again? What *was* the test? Was she supposed to ignore everything but the great need that brought her or ....

The wail turned to a coughing cry, that uh uh uh aaaahh that came from a temporary burst of energy fueled by hunger and fear and need.

Trap or test, whether she lost the path or not, even for Arakney's sake, whether the baby was real or a dream, she couldn't leave it out here.

It was an angry baby. Its small face was crumpled and the tears coming from its tightly shut eyes were tears of rage. Yohn laughed. "Ya, baby," she said. "It's a nasty place, isn't it. Let's get out of here together."

> "My teacher and companion lies unconscious and dying. Wake her. Save her."

She leaned down, slipped her hands under it and lifted it up. It stopped screaming and cooed at her. "Now aren't you a one. Good thing you've got that bitty bit of a nose. I do stink, don't I. Well, we certainly can't stay here. In you go and on I go."

Using one hand while she held the baby against her with the other, she pulled her blouse up over the belt, then she eased the baby into that crude carry-pouch. It wriggled a little then curled against her ribs and went to sleep. Tense with apprehension, Yohn turned, relaxing as she saw the white stones marching away from her. She went back to the path and began following the stones once more.

The baby got heavier and heavier as the night wore on. After a while it started to whimper with discomfort. Yohn slipped her arm round the small lump, rocked it and sang to it as she walked on and on.

The last of the cloth strips wore through and she left bloody footprints on the stone.

She kept on.

Some time after moonset when the clouds had blown across the stars and the night had gone so black that she could see nothing but the faint shimmer of the white guide stones, a new sound trickled into her ears and a new scent came on the wind. Water.

She went round a clump of tall

twisted pillars and felt rather than saw a cliff in front of her. She reached out and the stone was smooth and cold under her fingers. Not a dream. Real.

She followed the curve of the cliff and stepped off stone onto grass, cool wet grass, gentle under her mangled feet. A breeze blew against her face, heavy with the smell of water. She groped toward it. "Baby, we've made it. For a while there, I didn't think we were going to."

She reached inside her blouse, but there was nothing there.

For a moment she couldn't move, racked by a sense of loss more terrible than anything she had ever known. She stood there, shaking, tears cutting through the dirt on her filthy face until a rage hotter than the lava had once been burned her free of her grief. She forgot her thirst, her bloody feet, and charged along the stream, hunting for the creature who'd done this to her.

A glimmer of silver stopped her, turned her wary again.

She saw ahead of her an arched opening in the side of the canyon and above it the outline of a running horse, silver lines in the black stone. She took a deep breath, closed her hands into fists and walked through the arch.

And into a place of mists and ambiguity — as if it were not entirely present in any one place, but existing in many simultaneously. In the center of the eddying mist, a figure draped in a heavy black robe, a cowl drawn forward hiding its face, sat waiting for her.

"What do you desire, Fox Maid?" The voice was both androgynous and dangerous in a way that made the hairs stand on Yohn's arm.

She shut her eyes and swallowed the hot words that hung at the back of her throat. "What I've earned." She couldn't help adding, "I hope you've enjoyed my anguish and my pain. And my name is Yohn."

"I am the Melanchro. You have earned that. And the right to require one service from me. Speak its name and it will be done."

Yohn licked dry lips. "My teacher and companion lies unconscious and dying. Wake her. Save her."

A gloved hand emerged from the sleeve. "Take hold and don't let go."

One step and they were at the pool with the circling goldfish. Yohn's feet were healed and her body clean, the birds' excrement gone, the skirt that had been torn to strips back in place.

A second step and they stood on a hill above Scandary.

Roaring and whistling, trying to drown the voices of the Oddities of Scandary who stood on the walkway behind the parapet, singing raggedly at it, the Hoggar Vinj rolled about the town, a surging sphere of thick black smoke. It had such a corpulent self-satisfaction and arrogance that Yohn wanted to bite it, but it had so little substance anywhere that there was nothing to bite, no place where her teeth could gain any useful purchase.

She pulled her hand free. "Aren't you going to do something?"

Melanchro said nothing. Waves of *something* went out from the ambiguous figure, ripples in the air between here and Scandary like those when a stone is tossed into a pool. Ripples that Yohn felt, but could not name or understand. Ripples that neither the Oddities nor the Hoggar Vinj seemed to notice.

There was a disturbance on the wall. The Oddities moved aside to let a familiar figure through. Arakney. Then Piri jumped onto the parapet and set his flute to his lips. Yohn sucked in a breath, pressed her hand across her mouth to hold in a shout of joy.

The Hoggar Vinj twitched, seemed to thicken and grow angrier as the music from that flute wove a silver net around it.

Arakney shook the Story Gourd and began to chant, those strange and musical words she and Piri used for talking sometimes, when they didn't want Yohn to know what they were saying. "Tatu ta ratu," she sang. "Shukares ta a-eh."

The Vinj roared its rage, seethed and curled upward like a wave trying to break over the wall.

"We will not be moved," Arakney sang, her voice more powerful than Yohn had ever heard it, rich and deep, soft and slow. She sang it again. "We will not be moved."

The Oddities of Scandary caught up those words and sang them with her. Only a few at first, then more and more of them.

"Shukares ta a-eh," Arakney sang. "Siha ves te chul. We shall not be moved."

"We shall not be moved," the Oddities sang with her, a great swelling sound, voices all together, a sound like a hammer.

The hammer beat at the Hoggar Vinj. The cloud grew smaller and smaller. It started struggling, thrusting out pseudopods, and still it grew smaller and smaller, denser, uglier, more terrifying. It flung itself against the town wall, rebounded and screamed, a sound that echoed across the land, filled with rage and hate and touched with fear. It tried to escape but the silver web of the flute song held it where it was.

The Hoggar Vinj shrank and shrank until there was a last !pop! and it vanished.

Yohn danced on the hilltop, exultation filling her. "It's dead. It's dead. Dead and gone."

Melanchro touched her shoulder and a coldness filled her. "Not dead. Only gone for a while. It will be back."

"What did you do?"

"I am the Melanchro. The opener out of possibility. If people have the strength and good sense to recognize me, many things can happen."

The gates of the town flew open and the Oddities poured forth, dancing in their individual ways in a celebration of joy. Arakney came with them, leaning on Tachot's arm and Piri danced beside her, waving his flute.

Yohn watched a moment, grinning with delight, then turned to ask more questions.

The Melanchro was gone.

"Tsah!" She shook her head. "When your job is done, I suppose it's good manners to go away." She ran her fingers through her hair, shook out her skirt, then went running to meet her friends.

❄

Jo Clayton has noted on a previous occasion that she "hates writing bios." On the occasion of this story, she offers the following: "My geraniums blooming red, white and magenta, apple blossom pink and orange, the tiny leaves of a baby oak tree in a pot turning orange and gold for fall, cats in thick winter coats — it's Autumn in Oregon and I have just turned in to Tor Books the first volume of a Fantasy trilogy called **DRUMS OF CHAOS**. Time of endings and new beginnings."

Nicholas Jainschigg lives in New York City with his wife Monica and a grey-cheeked parakeet. He won the Jack Gaughan Memorial Award for Best Emerging Artist, and has been Artist Guest of Honor at Boskone. Some of his friends and family members are models for his illustrations of characters in this story.

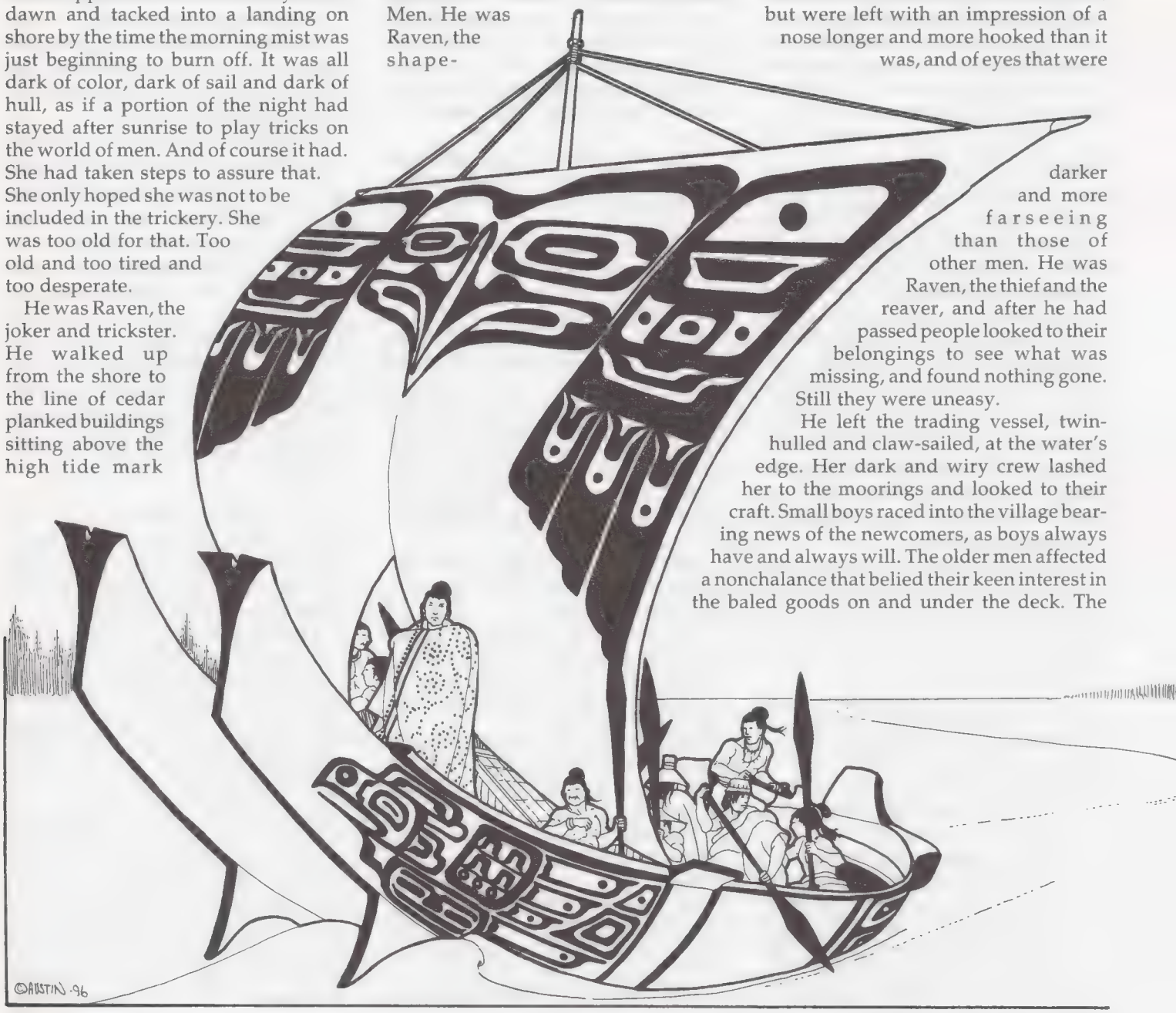
RAVEN

by Raul S. Reyes

It was as she had expected. The trading vessel appeared on the dark skyline at dawn and tacked into a landing on shore by the time the morning mist was just beginning to burn off. It was all dark of color, dark of sail and dark of hull, as if a portion of the night had stayed after sunrise to play tricks on the world of men. And of course it had. She had taken steps to assure that. She only hoped she was not to be included in the trickery. She was too old for that. Too old and too tired and too desperate.

He was Raven, the joker and trickster. He walked up from the shore to the line of cedar planked buildings sitting above the high tide mark and left tracks in the sand that were no different from those of other Men. He was Raven, the shape-changer. Men saw a man no different in features and stature from other men, but were left with an impression of a nose longer and more hooked than it was, and of eyes that were darker and more farseeing than those of other men. He was Raven, the thief and the reaver, and after he had passed people looked to their belongings to see what was missing, and found nothing gone. Still they were uneasy.

He left the trading vessel, twin-hulled and claw-sailed, at the water's edge. Her dark and wiry crew lashed her to the moorings and looked to their craft. Small boys raced into the village bearing news of the newcomers, as boys always have and always will. The older men affected a nonchalance that belied their keen interest in the baled goods on and under the deck. The



vessel was well-cared for, trim and taut, but both she and her crew had a look to them that hinted of cold and warm climes and far places. The older men on the shore sized her up behind dark lidded eyes and wondered at her provenance.

The stranger walked past the high tide line and onto the main street that fronted the village, heading for the Wolf Clan Longhouse at the end. It was not easy to miss, being the largest and most ornate. Red and black crests covered the front, not only those of the Wolf clan, but Bear, Otter, and Eagle as well. He smiled a bit thinly at that last one. The Eagle looked vaguely like Thunderbird, an affectation. He had heard that the Clan Chief was ambitious and dreamed of an alliance with that powerful clan.

The stranger was lean, dressed in black buckskin and bearhide boots, with horn-strip armguards in the same dark hue. A flint dagger and a short stabbing spear with a worked obsidian head were his only weapons, but the easy grace of his movements and the look in his eyes stayed the young warriors that might have challenged him. He came to a stop at the entrance to the longhouse and addressed the oldest woman there.

"Grandmother," he greeted. "This one is called Tanaksan, and has come long and far to see your elders and trade with your village. Will they be within?" The old woman looked up at him with just a hint of recognition and saw more than younger eyes might have.

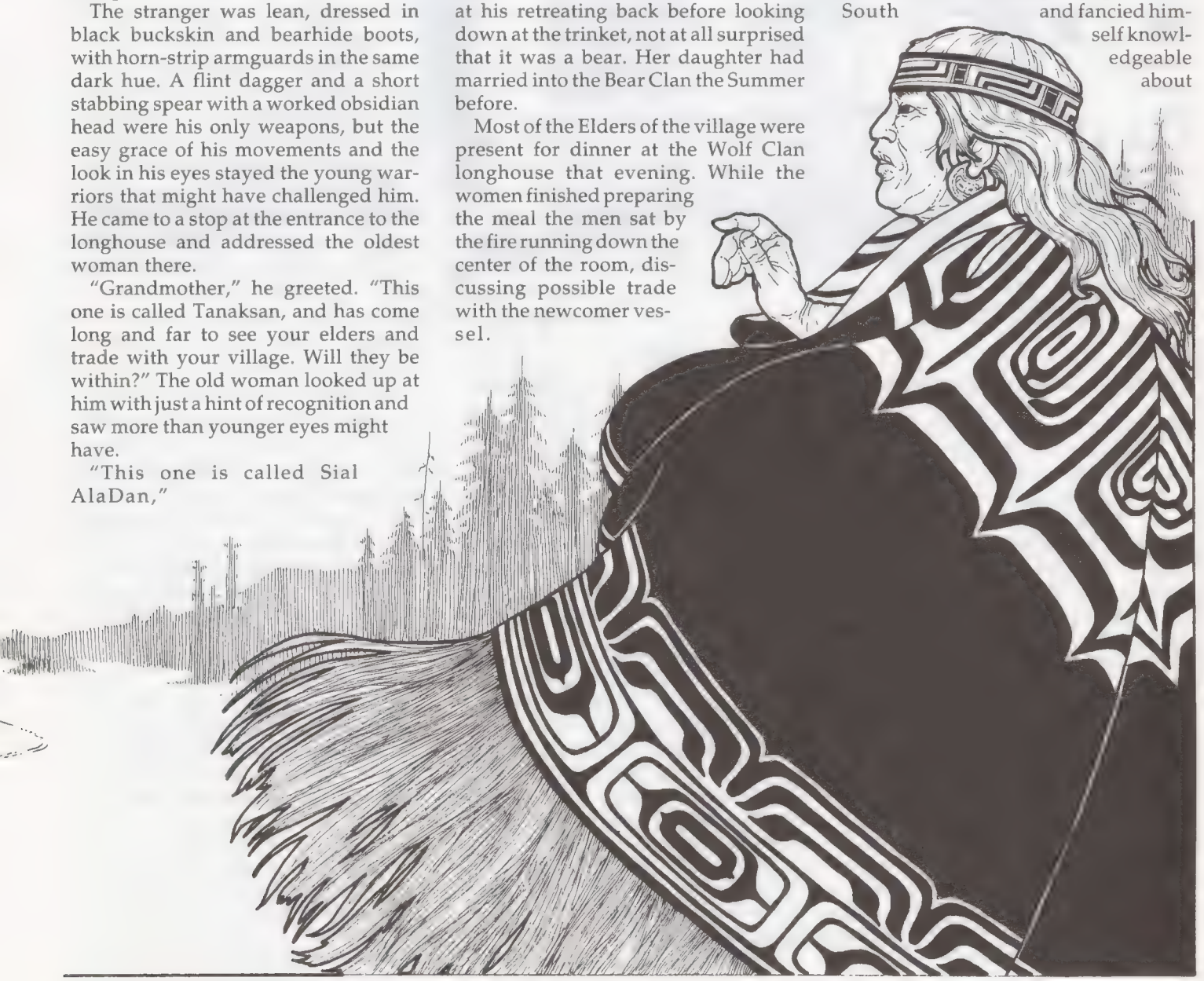
"This one is called Sial AlaDan," she said, gesturing to her own chest. Her action would have been improper in a maiden, but a grandmother with sons in longhouse councils was honored. "They are not all here now, but will be for the evening meal. I am sure they would welcome you then." He looked friendly, she thought. Not as menacing as when they had last met. But then, he'd always liked masks. He gave her weathered face a piercing look and then a slight smile and a mannered nod.

"Thank you, Grandmother," he replied. "I hope your new grandson will be all you hope for. Here is a Birthing Gift." He reached into his pouch and took out an amulet of Northern ivory, dropping it on the featherworked robe she had been working on. She took it with a word of thanks and then looked at his retreating back before looking down at the trinket, not at all surprised that it was a bear. Her daughter had married into the Bear Clan the Summer before.

Most of the Elders of the village were present for dinner at the Wolf Clan longhouse that evening. While the women finished preparing the meal the men sat by the fire running down the center of the room, discussing possible trade with the newcomer vessel. The old grandmother had taken pains to be near them, and within hearing of their words.

"No news of the ship's cargo, but the men wear fur vests from the far North. They have horns-trip armguards from the South, and their personal belongings are in boxes made from dark and light woods from across the sea. Earrings and other adornments are of turquoise, coral, ivory, and amber." That was Anansha, an old trader with four clever grandsons with sharp eyes.

"This is a rich cargo that comes to our bay. Their Captain carries only a short stabbing spear and dagger. That is the custom in the South Coastal valleys but his bearhide boots are Northern. That implies a varied cargo as well." That was Saanlian, a young man who had made two trading voyages to the South and fancied himself knowledgeable about



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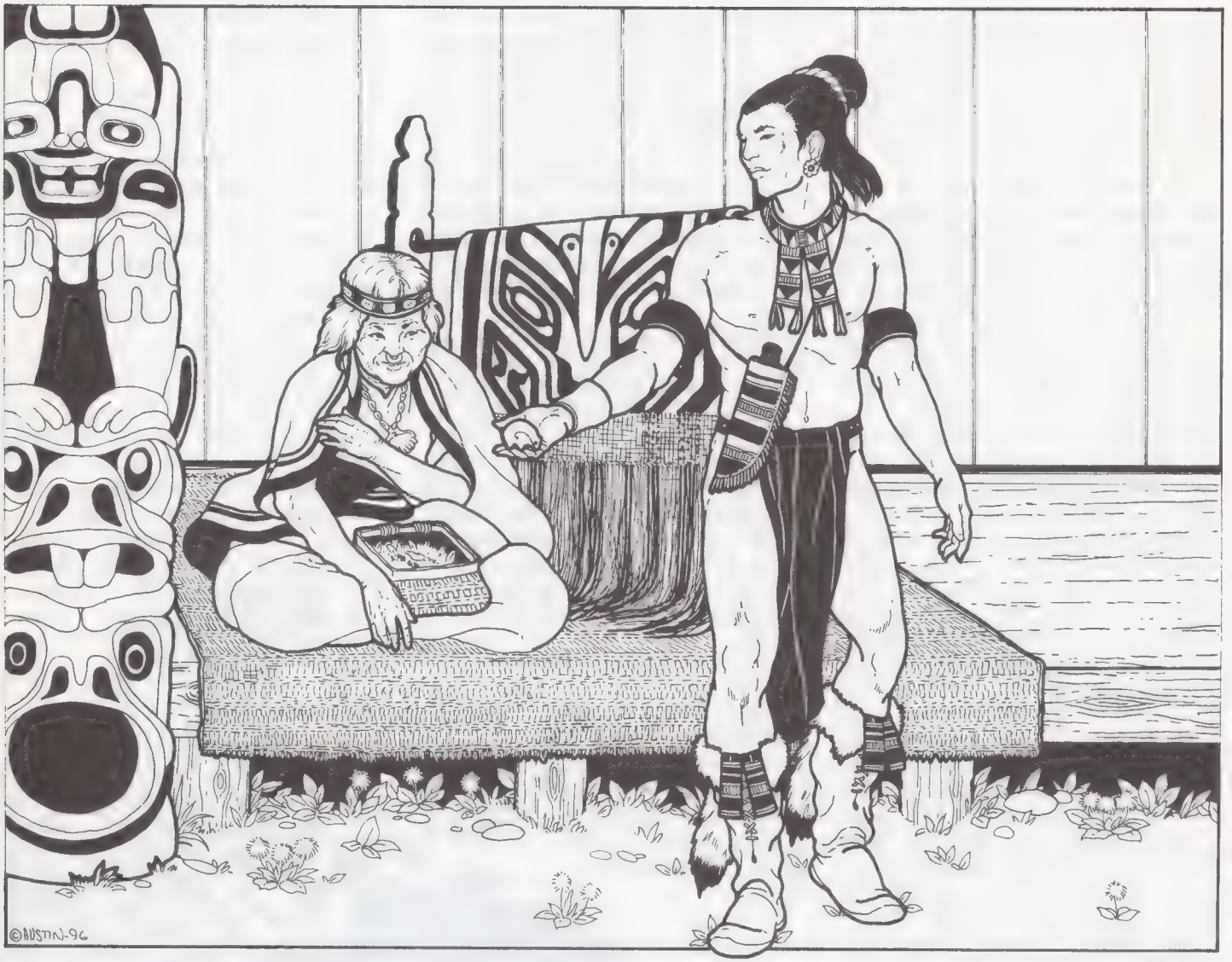


Artwork by Alicia Austin

things strange and foreign. Some of the young men in the corners stirred at the mention of weapons.

"What brings such a one and his ship to our village? There are better trades to be made elsewhere." The speaker was named Pita LaIaal. His words rankled the Head of the Wolf Clan, Kamakansaq, for he dreamed of greatness for his House, and by extension, the village, but he had to nod his head to the truth of the old man's words, for while the village was of better than moderate size and more than passing wealth, it did not yet match his dreams.

"Can we make a fair trade?" another voice asked, out of the gloom. All looked at him who spoke, Similiuk, a Trader/Captain with more than a few white hairs on his head. Two eye-teeth of the Snow-Tiger ringed his topknot, a reminder of a wild youth that had long since passed. Few Trader/Captains lived long without a good measure of sense to temper their courage. "We can make good profits if we can trade fairly with the strangers, but our reputation will suffer if they carry tales of poor trades here. That would affect our welcome in other places when we venture to trade, and lessen the number of vessels that stop here with rich cargoes."

There was silence while all stopped to mentally calculate the amount of seal oil, dried fish, Mountain Goat wool and hides, feather-woven blankets, and medicinals stored in their longhouses. Pita LaIaal spoke first. "We can make fair trade with the strangers," he said. "It will leave us short, but the trading season is at an end and we can recover by next season. And we will be left with an abundance of wealth for further trade and gifting." Kamakansaq nodded in agreement, mentally assessing possible political and economic gains from the visit.

"We must make fair gifts this evening," he commented. "We will wish to appear worthy of their trade." Most nodded in agreement, although the faces of Similiuk and other Elders were unmoving in disdain for the wasted speech of one stating the obvious. All had already brought various gifts for that evening, carefully gauged to show the giver's wealth and standing without being too ostentatious.

Noise at the entrance caught their attention. The young men in the shadows looked up, their hands straying to their weapons. A quick movement from Similiuk stilled them. Snow-Tiger eye-teeth told of weapons-skill, however long ago, and therefor commanded respect.

"Who is it?" Kamakansaq called. A tall slender figure entered the longhouse, followed by two men, shorter but similar in appearance and bearing. They carried a cedarwood box between them, Their free hands car-

ried short spears, held properly reversed within the longhouse. Firelight glinted off horn armguards.

"This one is called Tanaksan, and I come asking for a place by the fire for me and my men." He gestured back. "We bring gifts for the House and would talk of trade."

"Welcome, Captain and Trader," Kamakansaq replied. "Warm yourselves by the fire, and eat and drink. We welcome good traders and hope you will leave satisfied with your stay."

The newcomer nodded and strode the length of the longhouse to the fire pit at the far end, where others shifted to make room for the guests. The cedarwood box was set against the wall, and the three sat decorously at their places, weapons placed in mannerly wise behind them, their hands resting on their laps. Their bearing and manners were observed by measuring eyes and weighed against the probable contents of the gift-box by the wall. A gesture by Sial set young women to work bringing horns of honey-ale for the visitors.

Nothing was spoken for a while as food was served and consumed. Fish and shellfish of all sorts, prepared in various ways, with assorted condiments. Dried meat from the mountains, sliced thin and stewed and served with berries, roots, and pinenuts. All washed down with more dark and rich honey-ale. There was enough for all. A feast worth remembering, and the hosts watched their guests eat their fill and breathed a bit easier. Happy, well-fed traders were easier to deal with.

The time for gifting came and the fire glinted on eyes curious as to the contents of the cedarwood chest. They were not disappointed. First out came a black wool blanket, the featherworked border iridescent in red and blue-green by the firelight. The stranger spoke. "Kamakansaq, we are honored by your hospitality, and your welcome does you credit. Please accept this poor gift as token of our appreciation, and of hope for good trades." The Head of the Wolf Clan took the offering, measuring weight and craftsmanship as he did so. Southern made, worked carefully and long, it was dark as night and light as the evening breeze, a Chief's robe equal to his ambition. He breathed a quiet sigh of relief as he handed over his own gift, a carved amber amulet on an ivory bead chain. He had planned to overawe and embarrass the newcomer. Now he was just glad it was equal to the gift he had received.

He looked around to see all eyes on him. They were expecting him to cast off his old blanket and don the new one. He put on an easy smile. "Such a blanket will grace many a Winter Feast," he said, "and add to the tale of your visit." He set the bundle on his lap, hands resting on the featherworking.

The air around the fire was suddenly tense, but the newcomer seemed not to take offense. With a nod and slight smile the rest of the gifts were handed out, with returns just equal to their value. There was mixed pleasure and relief in more than a few faces at that, but some looked at the treasures they now held and wondered at the trading to be done on the morrow. Gifting was usually a way to give advance warning of the trade goods value, and a few thought of pooling resources with friends and kin so as not to appear miserly.

The evening ended pleasantly, with the newcomers vanishing into the dark fog on the path leading back to the water's edge. The rest broke up into groups planning and discussing the morrow's business. Similiuk and Pita LaIaal walked away quietly into the shadows. "This is no ordinary Trader whose ship comes to our shore," one said. The other turned his head at that, the eye-teeth on his topknot catching the moonlight as he did so.

"Truth in that," he agreed, "but less spoken might be best. Attention from such as he and his kind is not always welcome."

"'He and his kind'?" Pita LaIaal asked. His friend's dark eyes gave answer. Pita LaIaal looked out to sea to gather his thoughts. "Kamakansaq was not the best, or first choice to head the Wolf House," he went on.

"Perhaps. Those who want the first seat by the fire are not always best for it. But it is done. We will see what comes of it. Sleep well, my friend." With that they each went off to their own longhouses.

Theirs was not the only quiet discussion following the feast. The women had sat quietly by their men, with the elderly grandmothers alone at one end of the longhouse. Now they cleaned and spoke quietly among themselves, some with uneasy glances at the older women who sat in the shadows. One of the younger women went to them to

gather up the bowls and wooden platters. "Mother, do you think he will help us?" she whispered.

"I would not have called him to us if I thought he would not," Sial AlaDan replied.

"He is a trickster," the young woman went on. Her mother nodded.

"That and other things," she said. "So is Kamakansaq. The gift of that blanket was deftly handled. He will not give up his robe easily." For a moment her eyes looked off into the dark, her mind elsewhere. "The gift blanket is exquisite. I would wager no human hands wove it, or set feathers to it." She came back to the present with an effort. "Your daughter, Tsa Tsin, must have her due." Her daughter nodded curtly in agreement and left. On the roofbeams above them a dark bird ruffled feathers against the chill and regarded all below with a measuring stare.

The next day broke with a gray fog that burned off fast in the morning sun. The trading crew started by bringing ashore boxes and bundles to line up along the shore. Delegations from the longhouses brought down their own bundles and boxes to form a parallel line higher on the sand. Then all settled down to an enjoyable day of haggling and dealing. It was more entertaining than most, as the goods from the boat saw daylight. Those who had made good marriages with other trading clans had an advantage, for they had kin who knew the value of goods in far-off places. Others looked to them for example, and followed their lead.

The piles brought by the traders were matched by other piles brought down from the line higher up on the shore. If the trade was acceptable the village goods were taken down to the boat. If not there was an awkward wait while more goods were fetched from the longhouse store rooms. On a couple of occasions the strangers brought more goods from their hold to add to a pile.

Artwork by Alicia Austin

That brought approving murmurs from the watchers farther up on the beach. Once the newcomers removed some of the tradegoods from one of their piles to indicate their opinion of the trade offered. That brought some appreciative howls from all present, and much scurrying about as more goods were added to the corresponding pile by the embarrassed clansmen who'd dared a miser's trade. Everyone noted the cargo well, for later retelling. Such richness and variety were such as were only talked about on most days.

The village was able to trade fairly, much to everyone's relief and satisfaction, and the day ended with an invitation to feast and game in the Wolf Longhouse. The invitation was accepted and all retired to prepare for the evening's feast.

Tanaksan and two of his men entered the longhouse that evening in plain dark garb, but obviously of better material than that normally worn even by a chief. Dark buckskin as supple as shadow, and horn armguards cleverly worked and polished to cast back the light matched dark hued wooden rings in their topknots. The plain blanket robes over their arms lay soft and light as goose down.

"Welcome, Tanaksan," Kamakansaq greeted. He motioned to a spot by the fire. The seat of honor. "Sit, and eat, and we will game the night away." With a courteous nod the newcomers sat by the fire, weapons decorously set behind them. The feasting began, even more sumptuous than the night before. The fire blazed cheerily, in contrast to another fire a month before.

"Kamakansaq is not the proper head of the Clan," Sial AlaDan had told him that night, at the small fishing village two days sail farther down the coast. They spoke in the shadowed interior of the Bear Clan Lodge, empty that night for the first time since the lodge posts had been raised. The usual inhabitants stayed in other lodge houses, thoughts carefully far from the magic being done by their fire. The old woman sat hunched over the small smoky fire as she said that. The man calling himself Tanaksan sat quietly by the fireside, listening to her with hooded eyes that covered his thoughts. "My brother, Kane AlaDan, left the Clan leadership to Tsa Tsin." She nodded to a girl child sleeping in the corner. A young woman, heavy with a second child and her face stilled by fear, sat by the child. She was recently widowed by a Northern storm that had taken her husband. A robe adorned with the Bear Clan Crest covered her young shoulders, and she fingered the material as if hoping to draw strength from it. "Similiuk and Pita LaIaal were to serve as Regents for her until she wed," Sial went on. "At that time her family would have chosen her a good husband, and he would have ascended the Longhouse to the Chief's seat by the fire."

"The Council of Clan Elders chose Kamakansaq as Head," the dark stranger noted. "Had your daughter's husband still been alive, it might have been different. With him dead, they had a choice." She looked at him out of the corner of her eyes. Doubt edged her thoughts, and she reached down to touch the bearskin she sat on, symbol of the spirit that guarded the longhouse. Calling the figures of the shadow world was dangerous. This one all the more so. Her uncle had been a Wizard as well as a Chief, and had taught her well. With the teachings had come warnings. Perhaps in response to her thoughts he spoke again.

"Not all of your brother has left this world."

"No," she agreed. "His possessions were broken and burned, and he was laid to rest on the pyre. But Kamakansaq stole a lock of his hair, and his wife wove the strands into his robe. He has some knowledge of the Shadow World —" the dark stranger snorted at that, but she kept on, "— and he used that robe, and the power it gave him, to influence the Council to an unjust decision."

"The affairs of this World, and their justice, or lack of justice, do not concern us. But until your brother's spirit is freed of this life, he cannot continue his journey, and his cries of pain disrupt the harmony we desire for our lives."

"So you will help us?" she asked. The dark one had merely gazed into the fire and nodded slightly.

The fire burned down as the feasting ended in the Hall of the Wolf. Many patted their stomachs and looked on the wooden game box brought in for the evening's entertainment. All had brought small, but valuable trinkets suitable for wagering. All knew the game, and waited patiently for their turns.

The horn tablets spilled out of the hide bag they were kept in. An animal or spirit marked one side of each tablet, and they all were set face down on the gaming board and shuffled swiftly by one of the young men noted for his quick hands. The gamers wagered on a tablet, and as they were turned over and removed from the board groans and shouts accompanied the movement of the wagered items from one side of the fire to the other. Each player set his winning tablets by his side, along with his winnings.

It was a simple and satisfying game, and soon enough most of the tablets were by Tanaksan and Kamakansaq. The latter looked at the five tablets left on the board with satisfaction. The last tablet taken off the board had been the Swan, by his guest. Most of the high-ranking tablets were gone by now. He set a turquoise amulet by one of the tablets, and turned it over. The Owl. Not much would be left to beat it.

Tanaksan looked up and smiled. "The night is mostly gone, and I would be off early. Let us end this game with a Chief's wager. My robe to yours on the next tablet I turn."

Kamakansaq looked up in surprise. Then he looked down at the board, his mind going over the game thus far. He looked up and across at the other man and the robe he wore. Another look down at the board. He nodded. He couldn't lose. Tanaksan smiled, reached down to the tablets he'd won so far, and turned one over. The Swan.

For a moment there was stunned silence, then a roar of laughter at the jest. Laughter Kamakansaq had to join in, but his eyes were filled with fear. With a quick and easy movement Tanaksan reached over and took the robe from his adversary's shoulders.

"The night is cold! I'll build up the fire!" he shouted. He dropped the robe he'd taken into the flames, it caught fire, and began to burn. In a few moments it was well on its way to ashes. As easy as water flowing the trio stood, weapons in hand. "Good morrow to you all," Tanaksan said, his teeth in a wide grin. "Many thanks for the trading, the feasting, and the gaming." They left in a cloud of good cheer. All in the

Artwork by Alicia Austin

longhouse were still amused by the turn of events, but for Kamakansaq, who gazed into the fire at the ruin of his plans, and Similiuk and Pita LaIaal who watched him with smiles that would not have looked out of place on a Wolf. And out of the lodge smoke hole a spirit rose in peace to finish its journey.

Outside the three travelers stood in the shadows before the dawn and looked up to see the smoky wraith vanish into the dark predawn sky. "So it is done," a voice spoke to them from the path ahead. They looked down to see the old woman wrapped in a blanket robe with the Wolf emblem on the back.

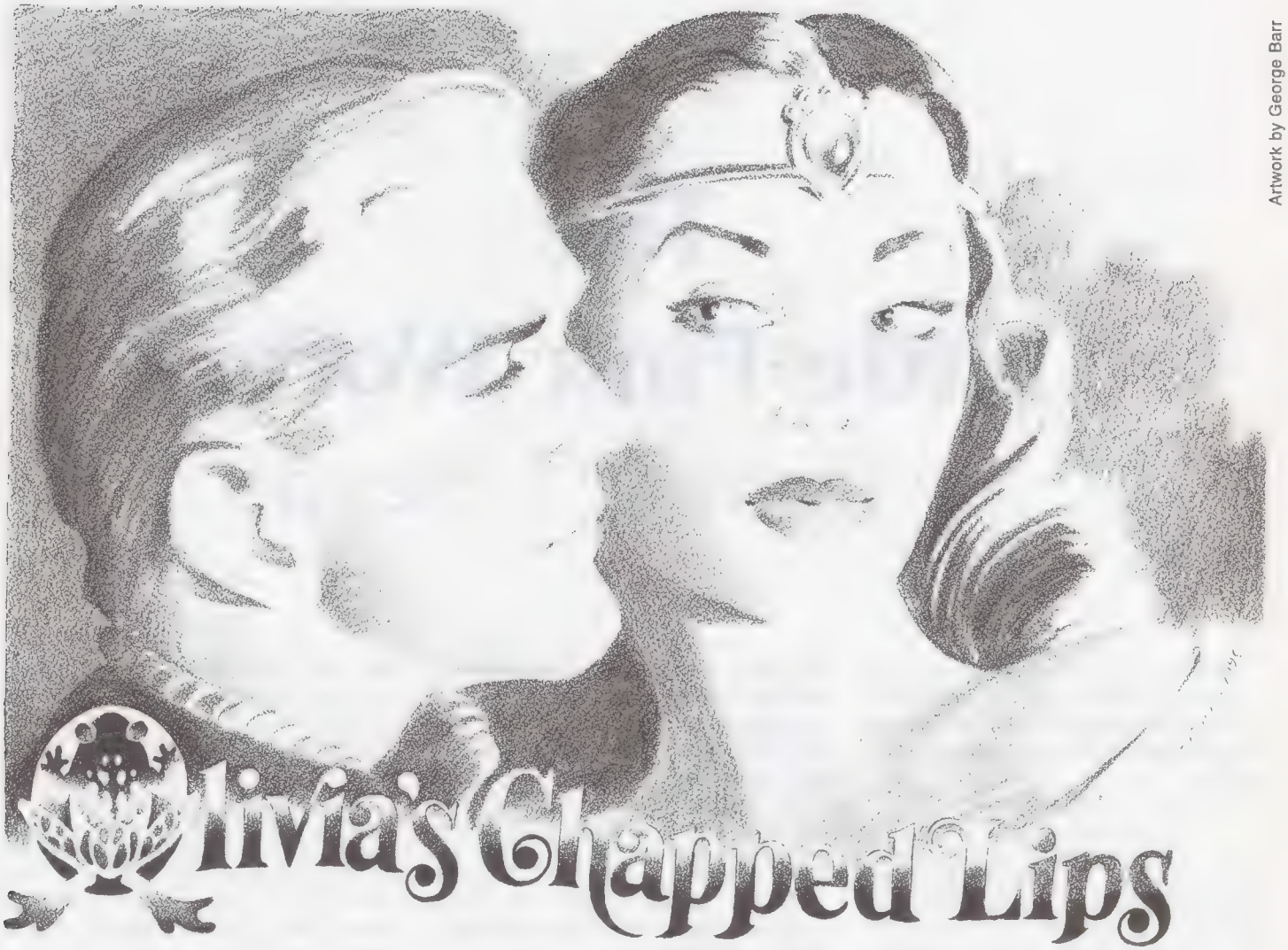
"It is done," Raven said to her. "To our mutual benefit." He grinned. "The essence of all good trades," he added. She smiled back, a smile surprisingly youthful. He looked at her as no man had for more seasons than most recalled. "Come with me, Sial AlaDan. There is a place for you by my fire." He stepped forward and took her hand. She went with the three of them, her steps light as a maiden's. And when the dawn came and her clanfolk exited the Wolf Longhouse to begin the day they found the old grandmother's lifeless form just outside the doorway.

❄

Raul S. Reyes was born in Texas in the late 40s, but has spent most of his life on the West Coast. He majored in Biochemistry at UC before switching to Business Administration. Since then he has been a policeman and an accountant. His background and familiarity with non-western cultures shows in his writing; most of his stories have a non-western, non-traditional background.

Alicia Austin's work is well-known and loved by sf and fantasy fans. She and her business partner, Jinx Beers, run Fantasies Unlimited in Southern California, a studio which publishes Alicia's cards, limited-edition prints and other artwork. In addition to more traditional fantasy, Alicia is well known for her work with Western and Native American themes.

Artwork by Alicia Austin



Artwork by George Barr

Olivia's Chapped Lips

by Temple Dalton

"I'm tired of being the most beautiful princess in this and seven other kingdoms."

Olivia was standing in front of a mirror, something she rarely did. Why bother, when you're beautiful and everyone knows it?

"And, I'm tired of having to kiss all those princes, handsome or not!"

Olivia's handmaid sat nearby, mending a gown. "But you know you must, Your Highness. The Fairy's spell can't be broken."

Of course, everyone knew about the Fairy's spell. On Olivia's christening day, the Fairy had appeared. She took one look at baby Olivia and outwardly winced. The Princess was one of the ugliest babies the kingdom had ever seen. Her skin was wrinkled, and the hue was green, not the rosy color of most babies. When she gurgled, it sounded like a croak.

The Fairy had shaken her head, looked again at the babe and cast her spell. The Princess would be the most beautiful woman in this and seven other kingdoms. She would fall in love and marry a handsome Prince, but she wouldn't know which Prince until she bestowed a kiss upon him.

From the time she turned sixteen, Olivia had spent five days a week kissing handsome Princes. At first it was rather intriguing for the young girl, wondering if this one or that one would be her true love. But the anticipation soon gave way to tedium. There was just so much kissing a girl could do. Her lips were always chapped.

Now the hours passed slowly as one prince after another dutifully waited in line for a kiss. Olivia smiled absently at each in turn, but her mind was on how to tell her father she was through with this kissing business.

That was why one particular kiss took a moment to register. Olivia felt a tingling sensation through her body. Startled, she looked into the face of the most handsome man she had ever seen. They stood gazing deeply at each other.

With all the attention focused on the young pair, everyone failed to notice the appearance of the Fairy. She waved her wand toward the couple, and before anyone could react, Olivia and her Prince disappeared in a puff of smoke.

When the smoke cleared, two fat, green frogs could be seen hopping out the door and away from the palace.

Olivia had kissed her last Prince.

❄

Temple Dalton lives in Texas and began writing at the age of eight because "no one wrote good science fiction for kids." This is her first sale.

George Barr, a Hugo-winner, has been a professional artist since 1960.

The Little Pink Worm

by Dorothy J. Heydt

"For I have seen with my own eyes the Cumaean Sybil hanging in a bottle; and whenever the boys asked her, ***Sybil, what do you want?*** *she would answer,* ***I want to die.***"

Petronius, ***SATYRICON****, ch. 48*

The only warning Valmai had was the cooling of the sun. She had started across the High Waste at dawn, hoping to reach Kennemai's Pass before the worst heat of the day. All morning she had seen no other living thing but a carrion crow high overhead and a little pink worm inching its way along the edge of the road, while the rising sun kindled and burned behind her. One moment hot on her back, casting a long shadow before her toward the foothills of the Claws, it grew suddenly cool in a little whiff of wind and her shadow faded out into a shadow that covered all the plain. And then it was upon her. Valmai cursed — silently, to keep the dust out of her mouth — and drew her headrail over her face. It was too scorching late in the season for duststorms (else she would never have taken this route across the High Waste to the Claws) — but here it was nonetheless. She unbound her scabbarded sword from her back and used it like a blind man's cane, tapping her way from one markstone to the next.

Blind within her headrail within the clanking dust, deaf within its howling, she breathed shallowly to avoid drawing dust through the tangled fibers of the cloth. She felt, rather than heard, her scabbard strike against each of the markstones as she shuffled along the invisible road. That was what the markstones were for: they'd lead her all the way to the foothills, if the storm lasted that long, and there with any luck she'd find shelter. It could be no more than three or four miles now. It was only midmorning, the sun wouldn't set for hours. The storm might die down before that.

But it was still raging when she reached the thigh-high wall that marked the end of the road. Behind it — she remembered the terrain from years ago — a gully fell between two hills from a culvert shaped centuries past, when rain still fell here. And behind the culvert was a cave, and shelter: always assuming no wandering wastebear, cavecat, or bandit had set up camp there first. She slipped round the edge of the wall, found the gully, crept on hands and knees into the culvert, her sword clutched to her breast.

Inside, she heard the wind hoot across the mouth of the culvert like a gigantic child with a winebottle, then die away as the storm's direction shifted slightly. She unwound the headrail to listen. Something there, sure enough: a faint shuffling sound; she brushed the fine dust from her eyelids and opened them to a glimmer of light, fire-colored and flickering. No wastebear or cavecat ever yet kindled fire, so that narrowed it down to bandit or legitimate traveler. She drew her sword and tucked the scabbard onto her back again, and crept forward.

The cave was small, with a round floor big enough for five or six to lie on it, assuming they were friendly. Overhead it rose out of sight like a well-shaft, and must break the surface of the hills somewhere. The fire laid on the stone was no more than two crossed sticks, but it burned brightly and its smoke rose rapidly into the air till it blended into the darkness above.

The man kneeling by the fire squeaked as Valmai crept point-foremost into the cave, and started to rise from his knees, and thought better of it. Instead, he clasped his hands like a suppliant. "Oh, please. I'm a poor man. I've nothing you can take but my wretched life."

"I won't harm you," Valmai said, sheathing her sword. The man was little, aged and spindly, and his hands trembled. "I came in to get out of this curst wind, same as you did."

The little man sat back on his heels, crumpling like a pricked bladder in his relief. "I thought you were a bandit."

"I thought you might be," Valmai said. "Since you're not, I ask leave to share your fire. I've got bread and cheese; I'm short of water, though."

"Oh, I've got water," the little man said. He drew both hands over his face as if to wipe the sweat away. "Lots and lots of water. We came through Kennemai's Pass last night." He leaned

into the shadows at the cave's edge and brought out a waterskin. "Please. Make free."

"Thank you." Valmai took several long swallows — the water was fresh; the little man might well be telling the truth — and accidentally-on-purpose spilled a little over her face and mopped the last of the dust from her eyes. She closed the waterskin and gave it back. "Are the roads clear over the Pass?"

"Oh, yes. A little snow, a little rock, but I made my way across without difficulty and I'm not a strong man."

"*I*", Valmai mused. *He said "we" not long since.* Her eyes better adjusted now to the cave's shadows, she could see there was no other traveler in them, only a little back-sack and the waterskins and a wicker basket the size of one's head, such as bakers used to carry raised pies to market in. *I doubt he's a king, and he can't be pregnant. Perhaps he has a tapeworm, or else he's mad.*

"Do you intend to take the Pass?" the little man went on. "To Tashka, yes?"

"Tashka, or wherever I can get work. There's peace in the East now, and little need for the likes of me."

"Ah." The little man nodded and took a quick swallow from the waterskin, almost furtively, as if stealing milk from someone else's cow. "You are a sword-for-hire, yes? And come all the way from the Eastlands? You must have traveled far in your life."

"Barring the Roof of the World, most places in Middle-Earth, I've been there."

"Ah. Do you know these mountains? Have you traveled high into the Claws?"

"Not to say *high*. I know these foothills well enough. Most folk don't trouble to climb into the mountains, since there's nothing to find and nothing lives there."

"Nothing to find," the little man repeated. "And nothing lives there, ah, that's true. But it was not always thus, yes? Once, when the clouds sailed higher in the heavens, instead of dropping all their rain t'other side the Claws, sailed over the mountains and watered this land, and the High Waste was a fertile plain and the heart of the Empire."

"So I've been told."

"But you know the foothills, yes? Do you know a place called Hakkahawn?"

"Not by that name."

"Hawks' Haven in the modern tongue. No? Do you know a place — it

Artwork by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

Artwork by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

was called the Almona River, but it will be dry now."

"Dry at least a thousand years," Valmai confirmed. The uneasy hairs were beginning to rise at the back of her neck. Who was this little man, who knew the placenames of a thousand years ago better than the ones of today? The legends told of immortals and long-livers, but only a few of each — thank the gods. "That would be Kharmon's Gap, only a dry ravine that cuts down out of the mountains. I know the place."

"Ah. And where is it?" He leaned forward eagerly. "Is it far?"

"Ten or twelve miles to the north. It's one of several ravines in that part of the hills, that fan upwards into the mountains. They used to converge into one great river down on the plains, but that's all buried now." She settled back against her pack and waited. If the little man really wanted to find Kharmon's Gap, he'd make an offer.

"Ah. One of several. And how do you tell one from the other?"

Valmai shrugged. "By having been there and seen them, I suppose. It's nothing you could put into words." *And may the gods forgive me the lies I'm telling. If I were less hungry I might be more truthful.* The little man couldn't be as poor as he was making out.

"Ah me." The little man wrung his hands. "I have only a few coppers, no fee worthy of an experienced guide such as yourself; but —" he looked from side to side "— but at Hakkahawn —" he gulped and lowered his voice to a whisper "—at Hakkahawn there's treasure. Yes, treasure from the old Empire."

Valmai closed her eyes for a moment to hide her dismay. Her last guess had been best: the man was mad. So then, should she leave him here, to make his way back to Tashka and safety, or tell him to take the third ravine to the north and let him die at his own convenience?

"Take me to the Almona," he whispered, "and I'll fill your mouth with gold."

And a voice spoke out of the shadows: "If you take his offer, you're a fool." The voice was hoarse, as if the dust itself had spoken.

Valmai sat like a stone, the breath frozen in her throat, all her hairs on end. And the little man clapped his hands to his ears and murmured, "Ah me, ah me." Then he lowered his hands and tried to smile. It was a sickly effort, and did not convince. "Listen to the wind! It sounds like voices at times, does it not?" and suddenly Valmai was very angry.

She got to her feet and walked round the fire toward the small pile of belongings, while the little man yelped and cowered. Either he was a mountebank, a voice-thrower (but why give himself the lie then? why look so frightened? unless he was mad and that was all) — or he had a perroquet or a jackpye hidden in his baggage and it had just woken and begun to speak — or it was something else. She nudged the backsack with her toe; it fell over and spilled a copper and a little bottle of what might be spices. The waterskin she'd already sampled. The basket had a low bottom and a high-domed top, held on by leather straps. She slipped them aside and raised the lid.

Inside the basket lay a shrunken head, its skin gray, its long black hair bound into a knot. *Ha,* Valmai thought. *A mountebank, after all, and this is his performance prop. A good one, too: I don't see any control strings —*

The head opened its sunken eyes and stared at her. "But not as great a fool as you are, Maltus. Give me water."

But Maltus was still kneeling with his hands clutching his head. Valmai picked up the skin and poured a stream of water into the open mouth. She poured for a long time, expecting the liquid to run out through the bottom of the basket; but it did not. Every spilled drop seemed to sink into the skin. At last the mouth closed, with a little sound like a sigh. Valmai closed the skin and turned back to Maltus, who was beginning to get control of himself again.

"You would have found it out anyway, if we traveled together," he said, getting to his feet. "Know, warrior, that I am Maltus, mage of the order of Erkuna, and that by my dread arts I have summoned and bound a Power out of the past.

"Oh, stuff it, Maltus," the head said. The voice was clearer now, as if the water had done its shrunken flesh some good. "It's no doing of yours that I ride in a basket for yet a little while. Greater than you they were who brought me down, and greater than any shall I be when I come again into my own. Take care. I am Essebai; and I do not forget."

Now Valmai began truly to be afraid. She knew that name. Changes in lan-

guage and custom over the centuries had made her Ishti, a pointed-toothed bogeywoman who ate naughty children; but she had been Essebai, the witch-consort of the old Empire. The tales told that she had been torn to pieces, not long before the Empire fell. The tales also called her an immortal. Apparently both were true, and Valmai returned to her original opinion of Maltus — he was mad, to risk dealing with such a creature — while she rose to her feet and bowed deeply. "Your Excellency. You honor me with your presence."

The head sniffed, and smiled: a little twisted smile full of bitterness. "You've been properly trained, at least. What is your name?"

"Valmai Tronsdaughter, Excellency."

"Valmai," Essebai repeated. "Slay me that rogue and wizard, and take me to Hakkahawn, and I shall reward you."

"Don't," the mage said. "Don't trust her. She'll slay you with her magic."

"Or you, with yours?" Valmai said, stalling for time. Essebai's magic had been powerful and her deeds horrible, all the tales said so. But she had used neither herbs nor wands, only a word and a gesture. And how could she gesture, without arms or hands?

The order of Erkuna, on the other hand, had been in decline for centuries; its remaining members put beans on the table with sleight-of-hand and fortunetelling. Still, Maltus might have read a book or two; he might have a few tricks yet, and they would require a wand and magical herbs and many other little objects that no doubt were in his backsack — and she stood between him and it.

She looked from one glowering face to the other and said, "Your Excellency, Master Maltus, this looks like a stalemate to me. Each of you is trying to hire me with a treasure that neither has in hand. I must consider. By your leave." And she sat down with Essebai's head and the rest of Maltus's baggage on one side of her and Maltus on the other, backlighted by the fire. And tried to think.

Her choice would have been to walk out and leave each of them to the mercy of the other, but the storm was still raging; she could die out there faster than in here. And besides — Essebai, the poison of the Empire, the consort of generations of wicked Emperors, none so vile as herself. Her deeds were tales to be told late at night, when the children were asleep and the grown folk left to listen and shiver. If there was any chance of Essebai's coming to power again — never mind how she could regain her powers as a bodiless head, if anybody could do it it would be Essebai — then Valmai could not let it alone. The gods knew what she could do, but there had to be something. And while she mused, she heard a little whispering sound, a little scratching sound like a twig in the wind against a wall, echoing in the culvert under the hoot of the wind.

Everyone's head turned (including Essebai's; how did she manage that?) and all eyes were on the culvert. And out of it crawled what looked like a little pink worm.

It crept to the rim of the culvert and paused. It faced a fall of no more than a foot's distance to the sand, but it appeared to have no eyes to tell it so. Unless that flat scale atop the head end protected a simple eye —

It wriggled, fell to the sand, and began to crawl forward again. Now, Valmai thought, she must have gone as far as fear could reach: her heart could beat no faster, her blood run no colder. The little creeping thing was not a worm, but a finger.

Valmai sat, still as stone, while it crawled (passing two inches from her knee) to where Essebai lay smiling in her basket. It hooked its nailtip into the wickerwork and climbed the basket's side, tumbled over the edge and fell past the sorceress's cheek into the chaos below. Shapes were moving in the faint light, six or eight separate fingers inching back and forth, bearing the head on knuckleback. And that was how she was able to turn her head.

"They tore me to pieces," Essebai said softly. "They stormed the castle and pierced my heart with spears. I laughed at them; and then they tore me apart. My heart they burned with fire and scattered to the winds. Parts of me they threw into the sea, and fishes ate of me. Parts of me they hung on branches for the birds of the air to devour, and when the birds died of me they fell in every corner of the land. That was when I wanted to die; but I could not.

"For two hundred and thirty years the two halves of my skull hung in two apothecaries' shops, one in Tashka and the other in Kanthuri. A merchant who traveled between the cities saw me for twenty years before the notion struck him. He bought both halves, put them together — and I opened my eyes and his heart failed him and he died. It was another seventy years till his grandson found my lower jaw. It was another century till this fool Maltus stumbled by and knew me for what I was. A wise fool."

"If not for me, Essebai," Maltus said, stung into speech at last, "you would still be hanging in that shop, wrapped in a Ginzan mudcloth and labeled 'dried head of a Southern ape'."

"True, and I do not regret it. You may. Valmai Tronsdaughter, what of you? Will you now slay him and take me to Hakkahawn?"

All her delays had got her no forwarder. Valmai opened her mouth; and in that instant the wind died. They listened for a moment, but there was no sound; the storm had passed.

"Well," Valmai said, "my answer is no, and yes. I will slay none today, but we'll all go together to Kharmon's Gap and to Hawks' Haven if we can find it, and see if it's worth the journey. After that, we can speak again. By Your Exellency's leave." And she fastened Essebai's basket cover and slung her pack onto her back. Maltus gathered his other bundles and took the two sticks of the fire in his free hand. Their flame faded to a dull glow and lit his way into the culvert.

Valmai followed. In the echoing silence of the culvert she could hear Essebai muttering to herself in a language Valmai could not even identify, let alone understand.

Outside, the storm was a smudge on the northern horizon, and the sun was high over the peaks of the Claws. Maltus stood at the edge of the road, resting his backsack on the top of the wall, tying its cords tight. As Valmai set off northward, he slung the sack onto his back and followed. Occasionally he glanced at the basket, as if to offer to take it back, but Valmai ignored him.

As the sun westered behind the peaks of the Claws, the world grew dim, every color flattened into a general brownish-gray, every sound magnified. Their own footsteps, the beating of Valmai's heart, the subtle rustling within the basket. *Essebai. Essebai,* Valmai's heart chanted. *Essebai, who took Queen Lalla's newborn child from her breast, and* — She cut off the thought with an effort.

Essebai. This is that Essebai who took a platoon of young recruits, none older than

nineteen, and —

She shifted the straps of the basket in her hand. *This is that same Essebai who told the old cobbler from his deathbed and —*

She choked, and tried to swallow. *Gods, what shall I do? what a towering task you have given me. I have to lay this undead flesh, not only for now, but for generations to come. How do you kill an immortal?*

The thought kept recurring that she could burn head, fingers and all and dig them into the soil. But that had been tried before, if she could believe what Essebai said, and hadn't worked. Besides, there was an old tale out of the Northwest, about a village that had burnt a vampire to ashes, and that was where mosquitoes came from.

The sun had gone well behind the Claws, and there was only skyglow to see by, when they reached the remains of a stone bridge. Blocks of stone the size of horses had fallen into the ravine and lay scattered among the piers that had once upheld them. Valmai led the way into the gap and found a place where the stones provided shelter from the worst of the wind that poured down the ravine, as cold as the water of the river that had gone.

"Here we'll camp," she said. "Master Maltus, if you'll rekindle your fire? I still have some bread and cheese. Uh — Your Excellency, do you *eat* in your current state?"

Essebai smiled that bitter smile of hers: not a reassuring sight. "No. I have food that you know nothing of. But I will take water." And she took long swallows from the waterskin, while Maltus set his two crossed sticks again and muttered over them till they burst into flame. Hard to tell in the uncertain light, but the head of Essebai seemed larger, its cheeks smooth and turning pink as the age-old tissues took in the water. Essebai had been beautiful in her day, the tales said, frighteningly beautiful, with her young fresh face and eyes full of old wickedness. One of the fingers reached up beside the jaw to catch the last drop.

Valmai set out the bread and cheese — they toasted before the magical fire just as if it had been real — and Maltus unwrapped the half of a jellied veal pie (the kind of pastry that usually rode in a basket like Essebai's, and perhaps it had) and cut it into slices.

"You do ill to trust her," he whispered to Valmai, passing the food to her; but the head overheard and chuckled evilly.

"Oh, I'd be several kinds of fool if I trusted either of you," Valmai said, and bit into her pie and chewed and swallowed. "Yet here I am leading the pair of you up into the mountains in search of a treasure neither of you can prove exists. But if I'd wanted an easy life, prosperous and free of danger, I would've been a plumber, like my mother." And again the head of Essebai laughed, and a little pink finger crawled up to the rim of the basket to scratch the tip of her nose for her.

As it fell back, she looked at Valmai and said, "This makes nine: one to go. It's further north, making its way across the Ronan Valley. It may catch up with us before we're done."

"And it found you," Valmai said, "without sight, or any sense but touch. I'm impressed." (Any who might have marveled at the diplomatic tone in the warrior's voice had never heard her mother the plumber negotiating to replace a course of broken pipe.)

"Oh, I know where my parts are, and mine know me," Essebai said. "My arms are — is that east? — One is east, and one north of me. My legs and feet have been traveling for centuries, hunting down my torso and thighs and other such parts that can't move by themselves ... Soon, as the elders reckon time, I shall have all myself again; then I shall have vengeance."

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Valmai shivered, hoping it couldn't be seen in the dim light. "But, Excellency," she ventured. "Upon whom will you be revenged? All your enemies are dead."

"Not Kelison."

"Kelison also, Excellency; dead and gone to make a tale to frighten children."

"Kelison is an immortal, like me; he cannot die."

"May it not displease Your Excellency, Kelison was a long-liver and he died. Shall I tell you the tale?"

"Do."

"After he aided in — um — deposing Your Excellency, Kelison took the Imperial Throne and held it till the Empire fell — about a hundred years later, would you say, Master Maltus? — and then he took a sack of gold and his favorite concubine and disappeared. A while later, he reappeared as warlord of a castle overlooking a mountain pass — not here in the Claws, but farther north. He collected tribute from all who went through the pass, and they soon learned it was easier to pay him than to fight him. For centuries they paid, and that was how Kelison made his living.

"In between caravans, he devoted himself to another interest. He had taken his concubine with him, as I said, and he begot upon her sons and daughters. The sons he drove out to starve or survive as best they could, but the daughters he kept in the castle. And when they were grown, he lay with them and begot upon them sons and daughters, and the sons he drove out, and the daughters he kept.

"Any stockbreeder will tell you, of course, that this is how to strengthen a trait in your stock: breed the dam back to her sons, or the sire to his daughters. Kelison was trying to breed others like himself. I believe he did think he was an immortal, and that any true son of his would survive any hardship — or if he didn't he didn't deserve to." She cast a glance to one side: Essebai's head was nodding in its basket, nodding in agreement.

"But the stockbreeders will also tell you that too long inbreeding will weaken a line. Toward the end, they say, all the walls of Kelison's castle were hung with beautiful webs made

by his women. But there were none left but Kelison himself and two women, a mother and her daughter. Upon the daughter he begot a son, and drove him out, and there were no more children; and the three of them went on living there for years with the gods know what bitterness in their hearts.

"Then one day a caravan came through the pass, and Kelison came down sword in hand to demand tribute. But there was no caravan, but his son with a small army at his back, bent on revenge. And he slew his father, and —"

"Are you sure of this?"

"I wasn't there, Excellency. The tales say that when the sword went through his heart he bled and fell, and that when his head was severed from his body, they never, never came together again and he died. And while the men were sacking and burning the castle, the young man took his mother and his grandmother by their hands and led them away to safety, and so they go out of the story.

"Except there's another tale that says they settled in Lakh."

"Lakh? And are the people there long-livers?"

"Not after Kelison's fashion, but they're strong and healthy. A man will live to see his threescore and ten, as like as not. It's a fertile place, and well-watered."

"It will do," Essebai said with that bitter smile. "They shall have the honor of going first. I shall water the plains of Lakh with the blood of Kelison, before I move on." (*Oh, yes,* Valmai thought. *This is the very same Essebai who.*) "How far away is Lakh from here?"

"Oh, a good ways," Valmai lied. "A hundred leagues at least."

"There will be time."

"No doubt. Just now, however —" Valmai glanced upwards: the Scythe was high overhead, a disturbing omen "— it's time to get some sleep." She unrolled her blanket and laid it out by the fire.

Maltus had already put out his own bedding: now he took up a short wand and a jar of herbs and began setting wards, not around the whole camp, but only around his own bed. He finished the circle near where Valmai stood, and sidled up to her. "You should not have told her that tale. You should not have told her anything."

"Probably not," Valmai agreed. "What of you, mage? You should not have taken her out of that apothecary's shop. Pleasant dreams, Master Maltus."

As for Valmai herself, she expected nightmares, and got them. She, who had never given suck, wept as Essebai tore the baby from her breast. She, who had come through a life full of battles without losing anything more than a tooth, knelt among the new recruits, waiting to see who went next. Down the long, long corridor that led away from light and air, she heard the sound of Essebai's bitter laughter.

And woke. There had been some sound. Her years on campaign and her uneasy thoughts had made her sleep lightly. The fire still burnt on its two sticks, and Essebai's smooth knot of hair glistened in her basket — and Maltus — ah! it was a nightmare still — !

No, she was awake, and Maltus lay with his neck broken between two long-fingered hands, two hands on strong slender arms that had made their way here with no chest or shoulders to join them. Maltus's wards might have guarded him from spells, but not from this.

Valmai flung her blanket away, grabbed her sword and leapt to her feet. Essebai's eyes rolled toward her,

and her lips seemed to move (Valmai's ears were deaf with the roaring of her blood), and one hand reached to take the elbow of the other arm, raising it like a torch. The lifted hand shaped signs, raised a finger to point; and Valmai's sword cut hand from wrist before the spell could take hold. Essebai hissed. Valmai severed the other wrist and stepped closer.

One glance was enough to confirm that nothing in this world would ever do Maltus any good. She took his backsack by its bottom and upended it. Bottles and bags and books tumbled out, sacks full of sacks full of nameless fragments of things. Essebai's hands were creeping backward, crabwise, backing toward their severed wrists. Valmai planted her boot on one hand and her swordpoint on another. There weren't really enough sacks; she ended by putting each arm in a sack of its own and the two hands in a smaller sack together. She tied the drawstrings very tight and bundled everything into Maltus's backsack again.

"Traitor," Essebai murmured.

"Why, no," Valmai said. "I'm no subject of yours, nor am I sworn to you. And what I do here, we call it self-defense. It doesn't grieve me that you throttled Maltus, but if you had tried the same on me, I would have raised serious objections. But look, the sun is rising. I'll break my fast on the last of the pie; will you have more water?"

Essebai accepted water. "Anyway," Valmai went on, as she consolidated her own pack and Maltus's into something she could carry. (Some of those things had to be salable in the right market.) "What if you had killed us both, what would you have done without us? Stayed here, with a pair of arms to move your head about, waiting for the next fool of a traveler to come along?

"Possibly," Essebai said, as if it did not matter much. (Her remaining parts were not far off, then. Valmai might soon have to deal with all of the witch, in few or many parts, and keep her somehow separated and off her road of vengeance: might the gods aid her.)

"Whither now, Excellency?" she said, with as much cheer as she could muster. "Up the ravine?"

"Upwards, on the northern bank," the head answered. "You'll pass two waterfalls, or so they were once. After that, you'll have to carry me so that I can see, to direct you."

"Very well." She fastened the basket

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and took it in her left hand as she began to climb. Her right hand she kept free to grasp for handholds, or to keep her balance — and from time to time her fingers reached up to touch the hilt of her sword.

They passed the lower rockfall at midmorning, the upper one shortly after noon. Valmai uncovered the basket and said, "Excellency? Whither now?"

The head opened its eyes onto the dry slopes and sighed. When she had last seen this place, Valmai supposed, it had been green and wooded. On the way up they had passed the remains of many terraces where gardens had grown a thousand years ago. "Go on up this bank a little farther," she said, "perhaps a hundred paces. There should be a path."

Valmai slipped a finger through one of the straps of the basket lid and cradled the bottom in her arm so that the head could see. Even after a thousand years, the dry air that had killed the trees had hindered their return into dust, and Valmai found the path at last by noting the bare spots where there were no withered stumps, where even in the days of rain no tree had grown. "How long are your paces?" Essebai asked.

"Two feet exactly, at a walk."

"Good. Take eighty-five paces up this path."

Valmai obeyed. The counted paces must have been all-important once, when the forest was thick, but now the cleft in the rock was plain and Valmai caught sight of it before Essebai said, "There. On the left."

Valmai looked at the crevice and said, "Well, Excellency, this crack will let me pass, or you, or this backsack. Not all three together. I'm going to have to fasten you up again — lest I drop you — and carry you before and drag the sack behind. It won't hurt your hands, they're on the top of the load."

"Very well," Essebai said, so mildly that Valmai knew there was something dreadful at hand. She raised the basket ahead of her like a lantern, and slipped inside.

"Well," said Essebai after a moment's pause. "Is it as dark out there as it seems in here?"

"As dark as the inside of a black cat in a charcoal-burner's hut at midnight," Valmai said. "The ground seems level enough. Let me set you down and find my firebox —"

"Did you bring those firesticks the mage was using?"

"In fact, I did." The fire had died as she touched them, and she had tucked the cold sticks between the three bags of Essebai's body parts. "But I don't know how to light them."

"I do. Bring them out." When Valmai did this, Essebai spoke a word that sounded like a hen trying to bark, and the two sticks blazed up like two pine torches. Valmai stuck them in the sand.

"Now. What are you waiting for? Uncover me!"

"Yes, Excellency." Valmai uncovered the basket, and turned the rim so that the head could see every side of the cave. "Is this where the treasure was supposed to be?"

"Gone," Essebai said in a terrible voice. "Stolen. Kelison has stolen it."

"Some of it, maybe," Valmai agreed. "It's said he and his concubine got away with only what they could carry on their backs. Somebody else must've found the rest; a lot can happen in a thousand years." She picked up one of the torches and made a survey of the cave.

It had been hollowed and shaped by the long-vanished water, and the broken stumps of stalactites still hung from the ceiling. The sandy floor was smooth, but for her own footsteps. "Hmmm. Here's something they missed: a spool of wire. Gold wire, a jeweler's supplies. This must have been worth a lot once; they didn't invent wire-drawing machines till Akarrian times, did they?"

Essebai's mouth, working hard, found enough moisture to spit into the sand. "Wire." The dark eyes glared. "Keep it if you will, traitor. I know you have been plotting to keep me from my vengeance, but you will fail. You have not long to live."

"I am an old soldier, witch-queen," Valmai said, "and I have no intention of dying before I am paid." *As for a plot, I wish I had one. I have only half of one, which wouldn't keep you off your road for nearly long enough. Rope rots; leather rots; barren wasteland comes under cultivation.* "Pardon me, witch-concubine I should have said; I don't believe any Emperor was ever fool enough to wed or crown you. I shall keep the wire with pleasure; now, how about teaching me the word to make these torches light?"

But there was a shuffling noise outside, as if something was stumbling against the stumps and stones, coming nearer. Valmai snatched up the basket and slapped the lid over the head,

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dogged the straps in place. Essebai screamed, and screamed again, while Valmai loosened a thong from its place on her belt and hoped to all the gods that the thing outside couldn't hear.

Here was a roughened place on the stump of a stalactite, higher than her head, but within reach. She bound the basket to the stony spur and pulled the thongs tight.

She turned, just as the little light filtering in from outside went dark — and there lay her sword, just inside the entrance, atop Maltus's backsack. She skirted the edge of the cave, while something else stumbled inside.

It emerged before she could reach the sword, stumbling in the soft sand: a forked shape, a mandrake root, its shoulders as high as Valmai's own: a torso all complete. No, one breast was still missing, and through the bare ribs she could see its heart pulsing still, glowing with the fires that had burnt it once to ashes.

It paid her no heed, stumbling past her toward the place where its head hung, its shoulders turning this way and that as if its single breast was an eye that could see.

It came to where the basket hung, and stood there for a moment, like a dog begging for a treat. There was a murmur from the basket, and the body turned toward the spilled sack, whose mouth was twitching from the struggles of the prisoned hands inside. Valmai crept forward to snatch the sword, drawing it back as the headless figure approached the sack.

No hands to pluck with, no teeth to gnaw with. The poor accurst thing began to pick at the sack's mouth with its toes, balancing on the other foot. But it got nowhere, and brought its foot down again with a slap.

"Tell your feet there," Valmai remarked, "that if they don't want little bits of broken glass in their toes, they'd better stop that."

But that had been a mistake, for the basket murmured again, and the body turned toward Valmai. "Release me," the basket whispered. "Give my arms and my head back to my body, and I shall let you live."

"Yes, and there's a river of gold in the next gully." Valmai edged to one side and watched the body lumber past like a sweat-blinded bull. *Poor damned beast,* she thought, *as we are all beasts without our brains.*

Then the basket murmured again, and the body turned to face her, raised one foot and pointed its toe. And the head within the basket spoke one word, with a vowel clear as ice that pierced like a spearpoint: and she could not move.

Her body, stiff and deprived of balance, fell backward a handsbreath and leaned against the wall. Essebai's headless trunk stepped back, ran forward and rammed Valmai in the chest.

Her corselet spread the blow, but it still hurt. The blind torso backed up again, ran and rammed again. She heard someone's collarbone snap, and hoped it wasn't hers. Essebai was probably taking more damage from each blow than Valmai was, but the witch could heal more quickly from greater hurt — whereas with five or six more blows like this, Valmai would probably be dead.

The body rammed her again, just off-center, and she fell sideways to the sand. She drew a cautious breath, while the body stepped back again, ran forward and struck the wall where she had been. Her limbs tingled with savage pins-and-needles, but she was able to move, and she crawled painfully away from the cave wall. Unfortunately, her sword was 'way over *there*, with the blind torso's path between her and it. She would have to creep the long way round. Her hand fell on something hard: the spool of golden wire, and a great light lit up in her head. *O fool! There are two brainless beasts in this cave. Here was my solution all along, and I never realized it till now.*

Now all she had to do was to live long enough to carry out. And Essebai had finally realized that her shoulders were striking rock, not armored flesh: the body was turning slowly, its feet shuffling through the sand, searching for her. Valmai grinned like a wolf, and raised her hand and threw the golden spool against the far wall. It struck and fell heavily to the sand, and the torso turned in that direction. Valmai let it get several feet away, then crept behind its back to reach her sword. With two good strokes she cut off its feet at the ankles.

After that it was merely a matter of hard work. The sharp knife at her belt was a better tool for the job than her sword. She'd butchered many a stag and boar with it, but never a man before now. She took the hands from their bag and bound them to a stalactite with the fingers pointing upward, so that it

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was safe to walk underneath them. She did the same with the feet. Then she severed the other joints and hung them high, each from its own spur of rock, while Essebai cursed inside her basket, mostly in tongues Valmai didn't know.

It was after Valmai had run out of thongs, and so must sit astride the struggling torso cutting a leather bag into strips, that the head dropped back into the common speech. "Release me," it said, almost pleading. "Release me, and I will make you my Vizier, and you shall have power over the whole earth, and wealth undreamed of."

"You're a fool," Valmai said calmly, cutting thongs, "if you think I'm fool enough to listen to you. I know what happened to your other Viziers. You're Essebai. Remember the Queen's baby? Remember the young recruits? Remember the old cobbler? Why do you suppose I should trust you?

"Anyway, since the happy gods seem to've decided that death is too good for you, and have punished you with life, I see it as my task to make sure you serve out your sentence where you can't hurt anyone else. There, now." Her fist full of thongs, Valmai rose to her knees and set to work on the torso.

When she was done, the cave looked like an ogre's butchershop — but a tidy ogre, who had hung up each joint neatly and securely from its own hook. She cleaned her knife and repacked the backsack; some of those tools and herbs of Maltus's would fetch a few coins at the right market. Shuffling through the sand as the blind beast had done before her, but with greater effect, she found six gold coins and a ring set with a ruby. Almost a mouthful; old Maltus had been right in that at least. There was probably more, she guessed, and added a sieve to the mental list of provisions she would buy in Tashka.

"You still have not defeated me," Essebai's head said from its basket. "You'll go away, yes, live your miserable little life, while I remain here. Years will pass, centuries maybe, but these thongs will rot away, fall into dust; and I shall rise up whole again from the ground. And you will be dead, and nothing will stand in my way when I go forth to do my will on your descendants and all mankind."

"Well, actually, I've thought of that," Valmai said, and left the cave without another word. Those thongs were stout and good, and they needn't last centuries, only a year or two.

* * *

In fact, it didn't take nearly that long: a few days through the Pass to Tashka; a few days to buy provisions; a few days to come back. Her task reached its end within half a year. Out on the Waste, a thin cloud veil putting a rainbow ring around the sun and the Claws only a vague smudge on the horizon, she stopped for the last time and dismounted.

"I don't want a warhorse," she had told the trader. "I'm going to far, unchancy places, and I want a horse so brave, or else so stupid, that she won't bolt no matter what she sees."

"That brave," the trader had answered, "the gods have not made any horse. That stupid, I think I can provide you."

And he had found her a horse and a pack-mule, so innocent of all intellect that it never occurred to either of them to wonder why their mistress should have stopped yet again in the middle of the trackless waste and taken pick and shovel to dig yet another deep hole in the sand.

She was done before midday, and cleaned the pick and shovel carefully before tucking them back into the mule's pack. She ought to be able to sell them back for some fraction of what she'd paid for them. Then from her saddlebow she took a pair of small leather sacks.

The first sack contained her toolkit: a sharp-pointed awl and what remained of the spool of golden wire. No more than a foot of it left, but that would do. From the other sack she took what looked like a little pink worm. It twitched irritably when she touched it.

She pierced the finger with the awl and threaded the wire through it; it thrashed like a worm on a fishhook. She wound the long end of the wire two or three times round it, and reached for a stone she had noted earlier. It was a chunk of wind-smoothed granite, about the size of her fist, longer than it was wide: it might have made a grinding-stone for some simple tribeswoman. Valmai wound the wire around stone and finger together — there was just enough — and twisted the ends round each other. Then she slid into the hole she had dug, and laid the finger gently on the ground with the stone on top of it. She climbed out, took up the shovel again, and began to fill in the hole. By noon she was done. She drew the shovel across the surface to smooth it out; in any case the next sandstorm would smooth out every hole she had dug beyond all recognition. And the storm season was about to start again.

And the golden wire would never corrode, and the stones would last as long as the world did, probably. And no wolf or bear would ever dig so deep. Even men with pick and shovel — a burial party for one who died in midjourney? she could think of no other reason to dig here — even they, having found one bit of dried meat wrapped up in gold wire, would have no way of finding the rest of them. With a little luck, and the gods' favor, Essebai might be settled till the end of the world. Valmai tucked her little sacks away and mounted, turning the animals' heads toward the Claws, and Kennemai's Pass, and the markets of Tashka.

❄

Dorothy J. Heydt still has one husband, two (grown) kids, three cats, and she's not sure how many computers because some of them are stored under the fabric collection in the third bedroom. She lives on the bank of Codornices Creek, which gurgles pleasantly in the dark when she gets up before dawn to write. She currently works for two scientists: one studies DNA tied in knots and the other knows several hundred ways of causing cancer.

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(Subscription blank is on page 63)

EIGHTY SHEN

by Carrie Martin

Tol could feel nothing but the ache in his legs. The sounds of the marketplace rolled behind him like a distant surf, the colors swimming together hazily before his eyes. Even the terror of the night before when Gyvern had pulled him roughly from his hole beneath the stairs had receded to a distant past. He didn't care what became of him if only he could be reprieved from the everlasting standing.

A man stepped to the block and opened Tol's mouth to peer inside. He gave the boy a shake, then looked in his ears. "How much?"

Gyvern's voice was firm, but Tol could hear the edge of fear. "Three shen."

The man laughed. "Three shen? By the sprites, man, you're mad to ask two dama. He's too ugly for a brothel and too puny for work. Even the eaters wouldn't pay more than half a shen for such stringy meat."

Gyvern's reply was angry. "Eaters would pay a shen for the brain alone. Three shen I need and three shen I'll get."

The man shrugged and boxed Tol's ear in irritation. "You've had him standing since before the sun was up and no more than three buyers even give him a glance."

Hope and cunning crept into Gyvern's voice. "You've been watching, then. You're hungering for him."

"Not three shen worth, man. I'll give you one."

"Three."

The man swung his robe angrily around him. "I'll let you stand the night as well, man. You'll find a bit of reason in the morning, no doubt." He strode away, losing himself quickly in the throng.

Gyvern sighed, muttering softly in his native tongue. Tol knew none of the words, but felt the meaning, and a sliver of pity for the man slid through him. Gyvern was far-born and would be banished if he couldn't pay the residence fee. Things had gone badly of late, with his brooder dropping dead twins and then losing the sisters to fever. He had nothing left to sell but Tol and the brooder, and loss of the woman would leave him without a livelihood.

Dark had fallen and the torches had been lit when the crone stopped in front of the block. Tol was beyond rational thought, and wondered if he dreamt her. She stared at the boy for several moments, and Tol smiled as her wrinkled face seemed to melt before him, to be replaced by a smiling beauty with inviting eyes. That melted away as well, to leave a great hole under the draped shawl. Tol's eyes widened as he saw wonders and horrors come leaping out, vividly real and then shimmering to nothing in the space between them.

The faceless crone lifted her hand, the bony fingers cupped as though around a ball. Tol's hand flew of its own accord to match finger to finger. Though he could see nothing, he felt a small sun between their palms, light splintering up his arm to be followed by a sticky wave of warmth.

The crone regained her face again, her hand falling to bury itself beneath her robes. "Will you take eighty shen for him?"

Tol heard Gyvern's quick intake of breath. "Take your madness away from here, woman."

The claw of a hand returned from its search beneath the robes bearing a weighty sack. "Count it if you like. Will you take eighty shen for the boy?"

Gyvern took the sack with trembling fingers, loosening the cord and spilling pebbles around Tol's feet. Tol blinked as the stones squirmed, opening tiny mouths in a silent greeting, then flattening and glistening to gold. Gyvern let the coins run through his fingers. "Are you mad, mother?"

Tol heard the laughter of a young girl behind her voice. "Eighty shen is what I have. Will you take it for the boy?"

Gyvern seemed to find himself all at once and hastily returned the glittering pieces to the safety of the sack. Tol heard them singing and joking as they slid to their accustomed places. "Yes, mother, for I've a fondness for the boy and see you'll treat him as your own. Take him then and good wishes."

The crone had Tol by the hand and walking stiff-legged through the crowds of merry-makers before he

could blink or think to bid Gyvern good-by. As the motion warmed the ache out of his legs, he began to feel the gnaw of hunger at his belly.

The crone stopped at one of the stalls. "Will you give a poor lad something to eat?" The man turned and Tol saw the angry retort stop halfway over his lips, to be replaced by a stammering cough. Tol glanced quickly at the crone's face, wondering if the beauty had suddenly appeared again to astonish the vendor. She looked as old and haggard as before.

The man reached for her. "Come, mother, and sit. Soup for yourself and your boy, and a bit of bread and cheese as well."

Tol found himself a moment later swaying above the steamy aroma of soup thick with leeks and wild asparagus, doubly hot with peppers and farish. He burned his tongue, then soothed it with the fresh bread thrust into his hand. This took him well beyond delight, for he'd never before tasted bread new enough to escape mold. He ate his fill, then found another empty spot for the piece of brandish the man tucked between his fingers. The smooth sweet trickled down his throat while sending strange fumes up through his head, and Tol laughed aloud for the first time in his life.

The crone finished her own soup and leaned slightly forward on the bench the vendor had fetched for them. "What will you be having in return, friend?"

Tol's eyes widened as he wondered how many heavy sacks hid beneath her robes. The question in his mind seemed to straighten the old woman and bring a lively wind that fluttered her robes back and away. She was a thin slip of a girl swirled in delicate white that held no trace of dark or secrets. She had nothing, then.

The vendor shook his head soberly. "You've eaten a gift, mother."

She smiled her thanks, her head nodding, her eyes searching the man's depths. "And was it you who made the brandish you gave my boy?"

The man trembled. "No, mother. It came from my brother's hand."

"Every gift is owed a thanks," replied the crone, getting to her feet. Tol watched in amazement as relief flooded the man, and saw suddenly in his dark eyes another man hunted by the king's corsairs, trampled by one of the armored horses as his shop fell prey to torches.

They followed the vendor through dark streets, Tol surprised to discover he could have found the way himself, though he'd never been within twenty miles of the market city before Gyvern had pulled him from his hole beneath the stairs.

They came to a cramped hut, age seeping from the sagging doorway. Tol followed the crone inside, knowing beforehand they'd find the trampled man. He lay knotted on a mat, his wife's eyes despairing as she sought to ease him with a wet cloth laid to his temples.

The crone sat cross-legged beside him, waving Tol to a place on the man's other side. Her clawed hand stroked the man's cheek, then rested upon his face, her fingers brushing his eyes and her palm catching his breath. She crossed her other arm beneath, her elbows nearly touching, the fingers of that hand reaching across the man's body.

Tol's mouth fell open in astonishment as he saw the crone's fingers calling forth the man's pain. He saw it shift and sway in the man's damaged body, then obediently rise and flow from the man to the woman's fingers. Tol saw then the reason for her crossed arms, for the pain itself wandered down one arm to the other, then dripped from the fingers of her other hand to the floor. Tol followed the pain with eyes and ears as it flowed across the room and out the door. The cobblestones of the street greeted it with a noise dogs might make in fighting over a bone.

When the last drop had been wrung from the man, trailing from the crone's fingers to join the flood being swallowed by the street, Tol's eyes lifted to those of his new owner. He felt no surprise in seeing a man's face in place of the crone's. The face smiled. "The loss of pain will only rest him, Tol. What's to be done now?"

Tol's hands lifted of their own accord, trembling with a life he'd never guessed at. He watched them pass over the man's body, hovering an inch or two above as they searched for the specific damages. He began to shake with fear as the realization swept in upon him. This was not the damage one experienced as with a beating, pain and hurt hampering movement and thought until the body healed itself. This was death lying before him, the man's body fighting against a hopelessness that would swallow him as surely as the cobblestones had swallowed his pain.

It was the crone's eyes, again in the ugly wrinkled face, that caught and held him even as her hands caught his own. She aged before him, lines multiplying, skin sagging more and more. Then with a breath of wind that fluttered the edges of her shawl, the face disappeared and he peered into night everlasting.

There was nothing but yawning black terror at first, and Tol's hands tightened on the clawed fingers holding his own. Then he heard, far inside himself, a merry laugh, as some part of him he hadn't known recognized home. There was nothing but wonder after that, and Tol reached and plucked from forgotten nooks and crannies all the life he needed.

His hands were moving again, keeping perfect time with the crone's, as they pulled death from the broken bones and organs, replacing it with the green shoots of light they found springing up from old death cast away from other places. Tol laughed inside himself as he understood what the cobblestones would do with the man's pain, as he brushed against the new life springing from the dead twins and the lost sisters. Nothing was lost after all, but only hidden.

Tol stirred the soup with a stick to keep it from burning while the crone tossed in pieces of this and that she'd collected during the day as they traveled. "Will you ask your question, Tol?"

Tol narrowed his eyes. "Can't you see my question, mother?"

The old eyes twinkled. "Of course. What have you against speaking it?"

Tol sighed, momentarily overwhelmed with the amount he had yet to learn. He felt he knew no one better than the crone, but knew almost nothing of her in comparison to what he glimpsed of her. "I wondered why you paid eighty shen for me."

The crone broke pieces of mushroom into the soup. "It was all I had, Tol."

"But Gyvern would have taken three."

"And in giving three I would have gained a young slave instead of Tol."

"But I would have liked you just as well for three, mother. It wasn't the money you paid that made me love you, but your kindness."

The old woman nodded, leaning her head over the pot to breath in the smell of their concoction. "I know that well enough, young Tol."

Tol chewed on the puzzle a moment longer. "Was it his blessing you needed?"

The wrinkled face broke into a grin. "I needed nothing at all from him, Tol."

"Then why pay eighty? It left you nothing later when you wanted food."

The crone took the stick from Tol and lifted it to taste the brew. "Have we gone hungry, Tol?"

"No, but you could have had whatever you liked with eighty shen. A new shawl, or perhaps—"

The crone poured soup into the waiting cups. "I got exactly what I wished, Tol. That's a great secret, you see. Everyone gets exactly what they wish."

Tol laughed and rocked back on his heels. "How can that be? So many are unhappy with what they have and wish for something else."

The crone settled herself and sipped at the soup. "I wasn't speaking of whims or fancies, Tol, but true wishes. Everything is put before us. We all see what we choose and pay the price for what we want." Her eyes caught Tol's. "We get exactly what we pay for, young Tol, so it's wise to think carefully about our wishes."

Tol frowned. "There are thieves and tricksters everywhere, mother. We've not been anywhere that lacks such. So some pay for a thing and find they haven't got it after all."

The crone chuckled. "Haven't they? Perhaps, Tol, some have a wish to be tricked."

Tol shook his head. "Why would anyone wish to be tricked?"

The old woman shrugged happily. "I don't know, Tol. I wanted everything myself. What is it you wish for?"

Tol drained the last of the soup from his cup. "I don't know what I wish, mother. But how can you say everyone gets their wish and you wished for everything? You don't have everything."

"Don't I?"

Tol looked around their campsite and listened to the trees creaking in the wind beyond. "We haven't so much as a tent, mother."

"It won't rain tonight, Tol."

"No, but —" Tol paused a moment, wondering how he felt so certain. The weather had been a topic of conversation everywhere they'd traveled, and he'd seen a few weather-tellers (though they were often wrong in their guesses), but he couldn't remember a time he himself had been surprised by the most sudden change. He

Artwork by Micheal Kucharski

curled himself next to the crone and gazed up at the stars, unable to sleep for his wondering.

The crone owned a small cottage deep in a woods, where she and Tol remained during the winter. He did the tasks he'd always done for Gyvern, though he'd never felt the joy in doing them for his first master as for the second. She thanked him for everything, but his pleasure came in knowing his services brought her a more comfortable life.

During the summers they traveled from place to place, the crone always able to tell which stranger would agree to feed them or offer shelter. Sometimes they eased the suffering of an individual in pain, though it was a rare thing for them to join hands and bring life from the great dark to heal someone. More often, the crone would give instructions for how to make a poultice, or what sort of tea to drink. Many times she would shake her head in sympathy for the grief of a family and watch an injured or ill person die.

One winter day, the old woman herself became ill. Tol's hands leapt out of their own accord and he wept when he found death. "Tell me what to do, mother," he pleaded.

She smiled. "Do whatever you like, Tol."

"I want you never to leave me."

She reached for his hand. "I'll never leave you, Tol."

"I want you to live."

"Very well."

"But you're dying. Tell me what to do to stop it."

The crone pushed her smallest finger through a tiny hole in the blanket covering her so the tip showed through. "What is that, Tol?"

"Well, it's you, mother."

"All of me?"

"Of course not. It's just the bit showing through. The rest of you is under the blanket."

The woman pulled her finger back. "And now that you see nothing of me at all, have I gone?"

Tol sighed. "No, mother. I know what you mean, for when you show me the great everlasting, I see that nothing's lost. But how can I see it if you're in the great everlasting yourself?"

The crone gave a tiny chuckle that ended in a cough. "So all this time you think it's been me showing you things, eh, Tol?"

Tol leaned toward her, earnest. "You've shown me many things, mother, but I have so much more to learn."

"True and true, Tol, but you ought to think what I paid eighty shen for."

Tol blinked and sat back to gaze thoughtfully at her. "Gyvern said the eaters would give one shen for my brain, mother."

"A fair price, Tol, and perhaps another shen for the body that houses it. You're obedient and willing, so I give you another shen for that. We'll say Gyvern asked a fair price for what he meant to sell."

"Yet you paid eighty shen, mother."

The old woman closed her eyes with a sigh. "It was all I had, Tol." He watched the air come shuddering out of her in a heavy breath. Her chest never rose again to take another.

* * *

Tol woke with a start one night and lay listening to the sounds of the winter storm outside the walls of the cottage. After a moment he got up and lit a lantern, then pulled the curtain back from the window and hung it there. The light shifted and swayed beyond the glass as the wind bent and turned the living green outside. He heard again suddenly what had wakened him: a moan the wind never made.

He found the couple a mile from the cottage. A man bent nearly double over the traces of a small cart as he pulled against the wind, and a young woman heavy with a child. He struggled beside the man to bring them to shelter, the storm pelting them with ice. His heart sank within him, for though he'd not passed his hands over the girl, he could feel death enveloping her.

He stood panting when they had reached the cottage at last, and had laid the woman on the crone's empty bed. The man turned and fumbled under his robe, his eyes desperate. "Her pains have been on her for three days now." He brought a small sack out and thrust it toward Tol. "It's but two shen and four dama, but it's all I have. Please."

Tol shook his head helplessly. "The old healer is dead, man. I can give your wife a tea to ease her pain, but —"

Something hardened in the eyes of the man before him. "But you're the healer's boy. Surely —"

"I'm sorry." Tol felt a terrible grief seize him.

The man nodded and returned the sack to its place beneath his robe. "If you'll give me the tea then, I'll thank

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you." He leaned to pick the woman up.

Tol touched his arm. "Come, man, I never asked you to leave. Let her be comforted, at least."

The man shook his head. "There's a healer near Atled, I hear."

"But that's two days' journey in good weather," protested Tol.

The man settled the woman's head on his shoulder and slid his arm under her knees. "You needn't tell me I fight a useless battle, boy, for older and wiser have told me so already. Let me lose her, then, but she'll have my last breath in the doing."

Tol laid a hand on the man's shoulder. "You want a son so badly?"

The man gave him a tired smile. "No, that was her wish, and what she was willing to risk so much for I couldn't deny her. I never wanted anything but to be by her and give her what happiness life allows."

Tol's hand crept to the woman's face and found within the death a vision of a boy running through his father's fields, daisies clutched in his hand as a gift to the mother that loved him. His voice was soft. "Put her down, man."

The husband obeyed and Tol's hands passed over the woman, discovering the nature of death holding her and the child. It was a simple and sad tale. The child was turned sideways, the cord wrapped tightly about his neck. Woman and child both were exhausted beyond their strength, and Tol understood it was only the wish itself that kept them breathing now.

The deep everlasting opened itself before Tol's eyes, challenging him. "Who are you?" it whispered. "Who are you to come between me and mine?"

"I'm the healer's boy."

"What healer is that?"

Tol trembled. He'd never asked her name. "She paid eighty shen for me," he murmured. "Surely a thing so unusual might be known."

The dark was mocking. "Eighty shen? What is eighty shen to everlasting?"

"It was all she had," pleaded Tol.

"Ah," sighed the dark, swirling around him. "And what does her eighty shen boy offer?"

Tol shook his head. "I have nothing."

"Then nothing is what you shall have." The dark turned to horror and swept over him. Tol gasped as he felt the woman's life slipping from his hands.

"No!" he shouted. "You'll not have this one yet, nor her child. Take what you will of me and pay the eater's price, or Gyvern's or eighty shen. I saw the boy running with daisies for his mother and you'll prove that vision true."

The dark pressed closer until Tol found himself struggling to breathe. Sound hissed in his ear. "And why should I prove an eighty shen boy's vision anything but false?"

Tol felt something turn within himself, confused. "It was no vision of mine, but the woman's, and true." The dark had nothing to answer, and the something inside turned again to surety. "I only wish to see what's true. This woman's vision is true, so you must leave her."

The dark rolled away from Tol and he eagerly reached in hidden places for life he knew. The child rolled and struggled beneath his hands, the cord unwinding. The baby lay at last head down and Tol reached in hidden places for strength to push the boy from his mother's body.

It was weeks before the young husband could safely take his wife and child home. Tol enjoyed their company and treated them to full hospitality. When they left at last, he held his hand forth soberly to receive the two shen and four dama. He had no use for the money himself, but it was all the man had, and Tol could not deny him that. ❄

Artwork by Micheal Kucharski

Carrie Martin writes: I'm a single mother of six, currently working as a secretary for the New York State Department of Transportation. After forty years of spinning yarns for siblings, friends and neighbors, and my own children, I was persuaded to write a few down and see if someone wanted to publish them. "Eighty Shen" is my first story accepted for publication. At the moment, I'm considering marriage and a move to Great Britain — perhaps I'll soon be sending you a change of name and address!

Michael Kucharski has worked as a professional illustrator and graphic artist in advertising and journalism for nearly two decades. His work has appeared as book covers, game boxes, calendars, medical illustrations, and posters as well as magazine illustrations for *Midnight Zoo* and *Pandora* and various non-sf magazines. In recent years he has begun showing his work in art shows at science fiction conventions. Michael lives in Detroit.

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An Interview with
Charles de Lint
by Lawrence Schimel

Charles de Lint first began publishing stories and verse in 1978, but it was in 1984 — when his first two novels **MOONHEART** and **THE RIDDLE OF THE WREN** were published — that he really burst onto the fantasy scene. He won the William L. Crawford Award for Best New Fantasy Author of 1984, presented by the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts, and has gone on to publish many deftly-imagined fantasy novels and stories. He is perhaps best known for his urban fantasies, positing the interactions of the realms of faerie (or other traditional mythologies) with the modern world.

This interview was conducted as a "silent" interview, taking place in print with questions and answers going back and forth over a few months of correspondence.

LS: *Let's begin at the beginning, I guess: you were born in The Netherlands, and grew up in the "army brat" lifestyle. While you often focus on the lives of nomadic peoples — tinkers and gypsies — your work is especially grounded in the idea of place. Ottawa, in particular, plays an important role in your work, especially many of your earlier novels; how long ago did you move to Ottawa?*

CdL: Although my family travelled a fair amount up until I was ten or eleven, we ended up settling in a rural community called (at the time) Lucerne, in Quebec, across the river from Ottawa. Because of the proximity to the city, it was fairly easy to take a bus or hitchhike into town when I was a teenager, so I spent half my time there and half in Aylmer, a small town that eventually swallowed Lucerne. Eventually I moved across the river, simply because I felt like living in a more urban environment and it was closer to where I worked at the time — in a record store. Then I met my wife MaryAnn and didn't want to leave the area.

What was it that attracted you to the city? Were you yet a writer when you moved to Ottawa? Does it have a lively writer's community?

I've always written, but it wasn't until the late seventies that I considered it as a possible career. Up until that point I was far more interested in playing music and quite enjoyed working in retail. Writing was a private pleasure, shared with local friends and correspondents.

I've never been much of a joiner, so I don't know much about the writing community in Ottawa except for occasionally speaking at meetings for various groups or running the odd workshop/Q&A session. I tend to know more musicians, simply because MaryAnn and I have been going to the local Celtic sessions for years and for the past few years have hosted a regular Celtic session at a local pub. I also know a lot of the visual arts community — again, because of personal involvement. MaryAnn is quite active with the arts community and, when I have the time, I enjoy taking part in life drawing sessions, an activity I've had to drastically curtail over the past year and a half because my duties as a writer-in-residence at a couple of local libraries have simply stolen away too much time.

The latter, I might add, tells me that there are a great many aspiring writers in the area.

*I know you are closely associated with an SF bookstore there, The House of Speculative Fiction, which plays a role in your novel **YARROW**, and which published a limited edition of your Borderlands novella **"Berlin"** (later reprinted in the anthology **LIFE ON THE BORDER**).*

My association with the House of Speculative Fiction came about more because of my friendship with the owners.

*Is it simply because it is the city in which you live, and are therefore most familiar with, that Ottawa appears so frequently in your work, or is there something else about the place that especially lends itself as a setting? **THE LITTLE COUNTRY**, for instance, while as firmly rooted in a particular place, is set in Cornwall, where you have not, to the best of my knowledge, ever lived.*

Ottawa appeared frequently in my earlier work because this is where I live and, believing as I do that there are no dull

Photo by Beth Gwinn

settings or characters, only dull writers, I enjoyed being able to set stories here and have characters run through its familiar streets. Also, though it may be an odd thing for a fantasy writer to say, I don't particularly like to write about a place where I haven't at least visited. Even in my secondary world fantasies, I've at least visited most of the settings — or rather, similar ones in our own world. Much of what I write requires a root in the real world and when I was starting out, I couldn't afford to go anywhere else, so I wrote about Ottawa and the area around it.

I also like the idea of making what local people think is an extremely dull city, seem exotic to those who don't live here. I certainly don't find it dull, but then maybe it's because writers are trained to observe more closely and anything is interesting if you take the time to pay attention to it. Ottawa's a particularly interesting mix of government town and alternative life-styles, urban blight and natural beauty, street life and wildlife.

Eventually, however, I had the opportunity to travel a bit more widely and was able to broaden the scope of my background palette. While I didn't live in Cornwall, England, I did travel to the area where **THE LITTLE COUNTRY** was set and researched it extensively.

Your recent books have largely concerned the imaginary city of Newford which you are creating. The first Newford story I saw was "Uncle Dobbin's Parrot Fair" which was published in Asimov's SF Magazine in 1987. It wasn't until you had a series of Newford stories in Pulphouse: The Hardback Magazine, though, that the city began to take on an identity. Did you know, at the time you were writing these stories in Pulphouse, that they were part of the same setting as "Uncle Dobbin's Parrot Fair"? Do you create the bits and piece of Newford as you need them, or have you mapped out sections of the city and then navigate these imaginary streets in your stories?

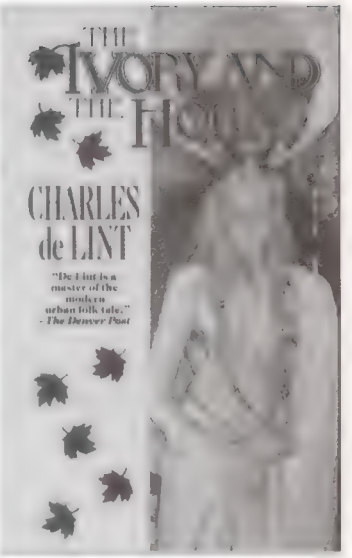
Much as I enjoyed setting books in Ottawa, after awhile I felt I needed a change. But since I hadn't lived long enough in another large urban centre, I wasn't comfortable setting a story in someplace like the Bronx, or East L.A., or London, England. Still, I had stories that wanted to be set in places like that.

One day, when I was asked to contribute a story to the **POST MORTEM** anthology, I decided to set it in an unnamed big city. This way, while I could get the *feel* of the place from having visited many such cities over the years, I wouldn't be tied down to figuring out the details of which way a street went, what store was on what corner, that sort of thing.

Some time later, after five or six fulfilled requests for other stories in the wake of "Timeskip", I realized that I'd been setting all these stories in the same unnamed city, using a repertory company of characters that I knew I would continue to visit in the future, so I gave the place a name, started a map to keep locations straight, started a concordance to keep track of things...and never quite kept up with any of it. But the stories kept, and keep, coming and since I've yet to tire of the setting, I'll probably continue returning to Newford for some time.

Had Newford not come along, I probably would have done some extensive research in some other place (much as I did with **THE LITTLE COUNTRY**). As it is, Newford is so alive to me now, and there are so many facets of it that I haven't explored yet, that I don't want to leave.

Which isn't to say it will be the only background for stories. **THE WILD WOOD** was set in rural Quebec where Mary-Ann and I live in the summer. And I've no doubt that I'll be revisiting Ottawa again at some point in the future.



You have a very close affinity for gypsies in your work, it seems — the novel ***MULENGRO****, and stories such as "Romano Drom" — and portray them in a very positive light. Do you know any gypsies, either in Ottawa or from growing up during your own semi-nomadic childhood? Is your knowledge about them derived from books and stories — the myth of the gypsy — or personal experience?*

Where did you discover so much about their language, which is oral?

Storytelling is an important aspect of your work, and also of gypsy culture. Were there stories of and by the gypsies you heard what drew your attention to them? Or perhaps after you began to study them, you discovered their oral culture as well?

I don't feel that I have a close affinity for Gypsies in particular. Rather I'm interested in "the outsider," into which category they certainly fit. It's the same reason the characters I like to write about the most are the outsiders who don't fit into regular society, even in my secondary world books. Now some choose to be outsiders, some have no choice, but they're all fascinating.

I don't know any Gypsies — or I didn't when I wrote **MULENGRO**. I did do months of research, however, mostly through books, but also talking to people in the areas where the story was set. When the book came out I got one negative comment from a Gypsy organization, protesting what they perceived as a negative depiction of their culture, but many more positive letters from Gypsies who were delighted to read about themselves, felt that I had got much of it right, and were able to separate fact from fancy.

I don't pretend to know be able to do more than scratch the surface of other cultures (or even other genders) when I write about them, but I do try to do it with as much factual research as possible, and with respect, and always recommend to interested readers that they should go on and read books written by real Gypsies, Natives, etc. For more on that, see the afterword to the 1995 edition of **MULENGRO**.

Our lives are stories and the stories we give each other are the most important things we have to share. None of us have a story too small and all are of equal stature. We tell them in different ways, through different mediums, and if we care about each other, we'll take the time to listen. See "The Conjure Man", "Coyote Stories", "Heartfires" for more on how I feel about it.

How does gypsy music fit into their culture and stories, and your own writings? Do you play any gypsy music, perhaps aspects of it fused with the music of other cultures?

I don't play Gypsy music, although some of the Celtic music I play comes out of the Tinker tradition in Ireland, but

Tinkers are a whole different kettle of fish.

The figure of the Trickster, in various of his guises, is a recurring and important theme in your work; when did you first "meet" the Trickster, in your own reading or story-listening? Did you know immeditately that he would become a touchstone in your work, or was it only after he kept cropping up that you began to realize this?

I first met Trickster in old myths, folktales, Aesop's fables and the like when I was very young — preteens, at least. And if you include Bugs Bunny, Heckle & Jeckle and other more contemporary incarnations, perhaps earlier still.

Only when Trickster began cropping up — but I don't think of Trickster as primarily male. There's a female trickster and she's a regular visitor to my work as well.

Is there some essential connection (for you/in general) between the Trickster and storytelling (I think of the final lines of Jane Yolen's poem "The Storyteller," which you published in a chapbook of her work: "It is all true,/It is not true./The more I tell you,/ The more I shall lie./What is story/But jesting Pilate's cry?/I am not paid to tell you the truth.")?

I think of those lines of Jane's as relating more to what storytelling does: we use lies to tell the truth.

Shamanism and totems seem very important talismans in your work. Especially books such as ***SVAHA*** *are very deeply rooted in Native American traditions and mythology, although elements of these cultures also crop up in others of your works; these same elements are also present in the the druidic traditions from which the fey you often write about are descended. Do you have a personal totem?*

I don't have a personal totem, because I'm not from a culture that has totems, but I've had a long fondness for certain creatures, particularly badgers, owls, canids and corvids.

What is your own religious upbringing?

I was raised Protestant; presently I'm vaguely animistic, but follow only two real tenets that seem to crop up in many religions: treat others as you'd have them treat you, and try to leave the world a bit of a better place than it was when you arrived. I figure if everybody did that, simplistic as it might sound, we'd soon have all of the world's problems solved.

The theme of a dream stealer shows up in many of your novels, especially ***DRINK DOWN THE MOON*** *and* ***MEMORY AND DREAM****, an evil figure who robs the very stuff of creativity from the character's souls.*

Do you remember your dreams? Do your dreams become incorporated into your fiction? Do you dream about your characters ever?

I don't dream much, or rather, I rarely remember my dreams. And even more rarely retain those that I do. Dreams don't play an active role as a source for my writing although I do like to use them in my writing. They're a good way of bringing a character's inner landscape "on stage," serving much the same purpose as many of the magical beings — dark, light and amoral — can.

When you sit down to write, what distinguishes the structure of a story vs. a novel for you? Many of your stories seem more like small novels, even to the point of numbered sections like microchapters. Is there a certain scope about an idea which tells you this will be a certain length?

Stories are shorter.

Seriously, I've been doing this long enough that I trust my subconscious to give me a short story when that's what I need, a novel when I need the longer work. I usually only work on one first draft at a time, because if I don't, the images and resonances can bleed into each other. Mind you, sometimes I like it when that happens.

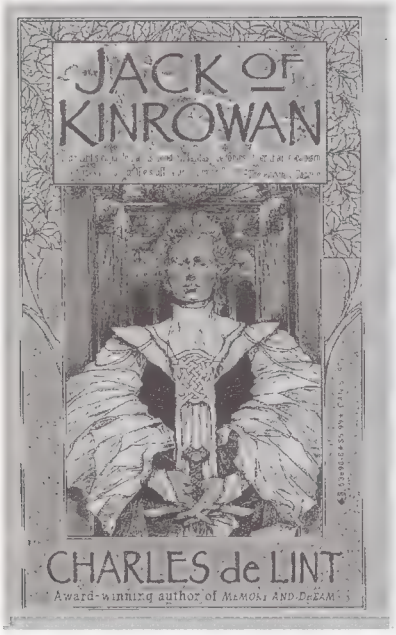
The things I know when I begin a piece are: thematic, what I hope to leave the reader feeling or thinking about; some of the characters; a few scenes. From there on it's a matter of my finding out what happens next until I get to the end. The hard work, for me, is in the rewrites where I have to make it all work and appear seamless.

Like most writers, I'd think, I have more ideas than I know what to do with. So when I begin a project, I pick the ones that sparkle the most and build the project around them. I believe that writers have to care deeply about their work, to enjoy the process, because if they don't, or can't, then why should they expect their readers to?

Some of your novels are expanded from earlier stories; ***THE HARP OF THE GREY ROSE*** *was first "The Fane of the Grey Rose" in Andrew Offutt's* ***SWORDS AGAINST DARKNESS IV****, and Marion Zimmer Bradley published a series of your stories in her* ***SWORD & SORCERESS*** *collections which later were braided into the framework of a novel. How is this different than writing a novel "from scratch"?*

I would say that **THE HARP OF THE GREY ROSE** is the exception, rather than the rule. The only other one that comes to mind is **INTO THE GREEN**, where the first three sections or so are based on short stories. In both cases, the novels don't expand the story, but carry on from the end of it — although I did fudge with **HARP** and change the "end" of the story as it appeared in novella form so that I could carry on with it more comfortably at the longer length.

What is it like to write short fiction in a world you've also written novels in, or other stories? Is it different? You are saved a lot of trouble by not needing to reinvent the wheel, as it were, in terms of the setting, but you must also walk that fine line of making the story



accessible to those who've never before read those other works while not boring those who have.

It's actually more trouble to do so. There's all the detail to keep straight — what goes where, the relationships between characters, timelines, etc. But it can be fun, obviously, or why would we do it?

Your Newford stories have been collected into two volumes, and because of the strong sense of place you've created, they hold together in a way that is larger than simply a collection of short stories, because of their common characters and backgrounds. In writing these stories, are they more like chapters of a larger story-arc, or do you group them together later?

The whole idea of a "Newford collection" came from my editor at Tor, Terri Windling, not from me. I didn't even realize I had enough stories to make up a collection until she pointed it out by telling me she wanted to buy one.

So **DREAMS UNDERFOOT** was unplanned, and the stories still are. I usually only write short stories when they're commissioned because I enjoy seeing what I can do with the theme of whatever anthology it's going into. It's like writing a sonnet or a haiku. There's a certain form you have to follow (usually some thematic element), but you have complete control in how you'll handle it.

I write short fiction for the pure fun of it. Naturally I enjoy writing novels, too, but they're such a huge investment of time, so it's hard, sometimes, to go too far out on a limb with them. In stories you can try anything because if you blow it, you've only lost a couple of weeks work, not a year or more. The experiments — in style and the like — that work in short stories will often subsequently find their way into a later novel.

Do you alter these stories at all when they are collected, to make them flow more connectedly?

The stories aren't altered when they're collected.

*How does writing in someone else's world affect you? You have written two novels in Philip Jose Farmer's **THE DUNGEON** series, packaged by Byron Preiss, and also wrote a novel for Byron Preiss based on paintings by Brian Froud. The Froud paintings, admittedly, share many elements with the novels you write on your own; what was the experience of writing these two books like for you and how did they differ, from each other and from the work you do on your own?*

The **DUNGEON** novels and the Froud project were completely different. In the **DUNGEON** books we were following a certain charted path — albeit my books were based on outlines of about a paragraph long that basically said something along the lines of, "they get from here to there." Because I had to write the book at a certain time to fit my own schedule, my first book (third in the series) was actually the first written of the six — the other two writers hadn't turned in their work yet. I checked in with my collaborators on either side to make sure I took up the characters in the right spot, and left them off again where they should be, but otherwise I got to do pretty much what I wanted with them. I didn't get to read the other books until I began my second in the series (book five) and then I followed the same procedure.

They were fun to do at the time, mostly because Farmer's work (particularly the **GATES** series) had long been a favorite of mine and I was curious to see how I could do in his sort of world. I don't see a problem with doing a fun project from time to time. I don't understand, however, how a writer could only do that sort of shared universe work, letting their own stories remain silent.

The Froud novel only required a certain mood to fit with the pictures; everything else was left up to me in regards to the story, characters, how it was told. That was enjoyable because I love Froud's work, but it was also fun to base a story on some of his art — a turnaround, as it were, since he'd previously illustrated a book of mine called **THE DREAMING PLACE**. Each of the writers for the series was approached because their style seemed suitable to this sort of process.

The **FAERIELAND** series seems to have disappeared after the second book (by Patricia McKillip) and I have no idea why.

While you write often about the act of creation, you are also a businessman. What are your writing habits? Do you treat writing as a job? Do you write regularly, on a certain time-frame? Do you write full-time? You mentioned a library job in one of your letters.

I believe a writer (or any creative person) has to be two people. When you're creating, the only consideration has to be that you create your work from the heart, that it's as truthful and strong a work as you can make it. Market shouldn't enter into the equation — unless, of course, you're using the theme of some anthology as a springboard, but even then the work should be true to yourself, not geared towards a particular audience.

It's only when it's done that you then put on the businessperson's cap and begin marketing it, promoting it, etc.

If you're going to write full-time, part of the business of writing is doing it on a regular basis. You can't only write when you're inspired, and frankly I can't imagine working with the fire of inspiration for the year and more it can take to write a novel. Certainly the reason you're writing it requires inspiration, and flashes of it will arise while you're working on it, but most of the time it's a matter of craftsmanship and putting yourself in the same place every day to allow the work to progress at a regular rate.

So I do it full time, five days a week, treating it as a regular job unless I'm running late on a deadline. And the reason for this is simple: I need time away from the writing — a life beyond the keyboard. I need to have something to write about and I can't simply find it staring at a screen or researching. Life has to be lived and experienced as well, for there to be anything meaningful in one's work.

Have you held other jobs? Do you prefer doing something non-writing related?

I've been a full-time writer now for thirteen years. Before that, my main sources of income came from working in a record store and playing in bands. The library job I mentioned is a position of writer-in-residence at two local public

libraries that has me in the libraries three days a week, critiquing manuscripts and talking to writers about whatever they want to come in and talk to me about.

I know you are also a Celtic musician; do you perform regularly in Ottawa (and elsewhere)?

I still play music, but it's become very part-time. My band rarely plays a regular gig, though MaryAnn and I do host a regular Celtic music session at a local pub and the other members of the band often drop by to sit in with whoever else happens to show up that night.

*Although you have published some sword & sorcery novels — **THE HARP OF THE GRAY ROSE, WOLF MOON, INTO THE GREEN**, and in a way the novella "The Fair at Emain Macha" — most of your work is contemporary, usually of myth transplanted into the modern world, or finding magic in the mundane. Is it that tension which draws your imagination most strongly, of magic vs. technology?*

I don't really consider any of the titles you mentioned as sword & sorcery, except for "The Fair at Emain Macha". The others I think of as high fantasy — secondary world novels.

Sometimes a story fits that format, or I feel like playing with preconceptions as I did in **WOLF MOON** where the werewolf/shapechanger is the protagonist and the harper the antagonist, but I do seem to gravitate towards a contemporary setting for much the reason you cite. I wouldn't consider it so much magic vs. technology, as using magic to expand upon wonders that we have in the real world. The otherworldly characters are a great way of doing that — and also a great way to bring a character's interior landscape "on stage" so that they can interact with that aspect of themselves, rather than spending a lot of time in soul-searching and interior dialogue which I find boring to read.

My rule of thumb is to write stories that I want to read, but no one else has written yet. Now you can go back and look at some of those high fantasies and say that there are derivative elements to them and I'd agree with you. But they were the best I could do at the time and hopefully I've progressed, and will continue to progress, in stretching boundaries — both my own and those of the field I'm working in.

Do you still enjoy high fantasy? Even though you no longer regularly write much of it, do you still read it for pleasure?

After twenty-five some years of reading high fantasy, I find it hard to read now. Too often I can read the first few chapters and pretty much finish the book in my head without having to read it. The details would be different, perhaps, but the tropes are very much old hat. There are exceptions, of course, and I delight in them when I find them. For example, Patricia McKillip seems to always be able to put a new spin on what's become the traditions of high fantasy. And there are others, but they're too few and far between. I find some of the most interesting fantasy is now being published outside the genre: Thomas King, Jeanette Winterson, Alice Hoffman, etc.

*You published two horror novels under the pseudonym Samuel Key, though the copyright page bears the name Charles de Lint. You had a horror novella under your own name in the Tor "triple" **CAFE PURGATORIUM**, and have regularly published in various horror anthologies; many of your fantasies also have very dark elements to them, often a vampiric evil. Was this alternate byline strictly a marketing-related decision? I can't imagine, having served as Vice President of the Horror Writers of America, that it was from any stigma of being labelled a "horror writer".*

You're partly right. If you have Internet access, check the FAQ section on Sam Key at my home page (**http://www.cyberus.ca/~cdl**) where it's explained fully.

When you read for pleasure, do you turn to horror often? Do you read outside the genres you work in much?

I read as broadly as possible, for pleasure, yes, but also to stay aware of what's going on in the field of literature at large. I haven't read much horror recently, mostly because it started to feel as repetitive as high fantasy — again, with exceptions, of course. But I'm having trouble tracking down much that's both well-written and can keep me surprised.

In your work you often dwell on the way myth and stories are told and retold, time and time again. Do you reread books often? What are some of your favorites, books that you turn to time and again?

I don't reread books as often as I'd like to, mostly because of a lack of time. Trying to stay abreast of the new books, doing research for my own work, reading (and when I say this, I mean selected articles as they seem appropriate and/or interesting) some seventy magazines a month, it's difficult to find the time. But the first thing I'll reread when I do have some time, are some of Barbara Kingsolver's earlier novels.

You've always had a review column, for various periodicals. There is that old saying "Those who can, do; those who can't, teach or write about it." You obviously can, and yet you also write about it. Do you think that, as a writer yourself, you approach reviewing differently than someone who is solely a critic?

I don't think about it that way. I think of it as sitting down with friends and talking about books I like that they might have missed, with occasional forays into more familiar territory to provide touchstones for the readers to gauge my taste. I tend not to write bad reviews simply because there

are too many good books to cover and I don't really feel like reading a bad book all the way through, simply to write a review of it.

Are the reviews you write the kind of reviews you'd like for your own books? That depth of understanding/attention?

What I like in a review, and try to provide, is: what is the book about and is it any good? If the theme is worth discussing, I'll do so. If something in the author's background adds understanding/resonance to their work, I'll bring it up. What I hate are reviews that are simply vehicles for character-assassinations. I've been victim to a couple — the most amusing being a fellow who decided that all my biographical material had to be a lie, and then went on to dismantle the book in question based on that fact.

Does your reviewing ever become a conflict of interest, either to your own writing, or wanting to review (or not review) books by friends?

I don't understand how a review could become a conflict with my own writing. I'll review books by friends, but since — as I mentioned above — I only review what I think are good books, I don't see that who wrote it is a problem. These days I only have my column in *F&SF*, which means I can only cover three books a month, so there are lots of great books I never get around to; if you're a friend, or you're someone I don't know who wrote a wonderful book, my not writing about your work has no hidden agenda.

I'd like to ask you about writing for other media. I know you've scripted a few comics, Warlock 5, and most-recently a short for Charles Vess. Your prose is often lush with detail and metaphor; how is scripting different for you? Working so visually, yet not being able to control the imagery as precisely as you're accustomed to, the teamwork involved?

The *Warlock 5* comic was a bit of a disaster. I stepped in to help out a friend, only to discover that I had walked into an ongoing creative struggle between the previous writer and artist and the publisher. By that time I'd turned in a number of scripts and I felt bad about the whole business, but it was too late.

My other comic-scripting has been a far more pleasurable experience. I love working with Charles (we're in the middle of another collaboration at the moment) because his imagery so suits the pictures in my mind. I'm not sure how many of your readers know this, but I used to publish small press magazines myself, almost twenty years ago now, and Charles Vess was one of the artists I snapped up as soon as he sent me samples of his work.

The most interesting thing about scripting for comics is that you can write two stories that play out at the same time: the one in the pictures, and another in the captions. A story I did for Joe Lansdale's **WEIRD BUSINESS** ("If I Close My Eyes Forever") was a delight to work on because of that. It's something you simply can't do in prose.

How is the collaboration of comics different for you than the collaboration of music?

Since I don't write music with other people, I can't answer that.

Years ago, you published a small press fantasy magazine, and also a small press, Triskell Press. I know you're busy, but do you miss editing?

Not really. And especially not after coming off a second six-month stint as a writer-in-residence at a local library. There's simply too little time.

What was it you were looking for in a story, as an editor? Was this different than what you look for in a story now, as a reader? Did you have an overall mission or vision for the press, and the chapbooks and magazines you published?

No, I looked for the same thing. The writers had to engage me as a reader — if they could do that, they had a sale.

We did have an overall mission — to provide a forum for fantasy fiction. Not simply heroic fantasy, but high fantasy as well. You have to remember this was a long time ago when the idea of a fantasy genre was still new and there were very few paying markets for short fantasy fiction. We also wanted to showcase artists for the same reason.

I use "we" here, not editorially, but to include Charles R. Saunders with whom I formed the press. I put up the money at first, he put up the expertise and I learned whatever expertise I gained in editing from him. I also had to learn magazine layout, distribution, good business practices and any number of other useful things in the process.

You still publish chapbooks each Christmas for distribution to friends and family. A number of these have been reprinted in other venues. How did this tradition start, though, the Christmas chapbooks? Did Triskell Press evolve out of these chapbooks, or the other way around?

No, Triskell Press was primarily to promote other writers and artists. Charles Saunders and I used some of our own work in the magazines, but that was only as a cost-saving factor — we didn't have to pay ourselves the way we did other contributors. Considering we lost money on every issue, that money saved was important.

The Christmas chapbooks grew out of stories I started to write for MaryAnn every Christmas and "publish" in an edition of one copy. Because she'd pass them around to friends and family, because they wanted to read them, we decided to actually do a print run of them, using them as a kind of Christmas card, and the tradition has held to the present day.

They were never — and will never be — offered for sale in their chapbook versions, but usually — and certainly in the last ten years or so — there have been readily-available versions reprinted in magazines and anthologies so that people outside our circle of friends and family can also read them.

To conclude, I'd like to know what projects you're working on currently, as well as learning what's already completed and awaiting publication, to give readers an idea of what to expect from you next.

The next original book will be **TRADERS** — you can get a sneak preview at the Tor website, or link to it from mine (http://www.cyberus.ca/~cdl). I also have a list there of forthcoming stories, like a comic book script I recently turned in to Charles Vess for his **BALLADS AND SAGAS** book.

As for what I'm working on now, it's a novel concerning crows and ravens and magic in an urban setting. "Crow Girls" in an upcoming issue of *F&SF* is a good preview of the sort of mood, although the only characters from it who'll appear in the novel are the the crow girls and the unnamed first person narrator. I'd tell you more, but I don't like to talk too much about works-in-progress because it steals the magic of actually writing it for me.

Thank you, Charles.

— Lawrence Schimel

A list of DeLint's books is on the next page.

A Charles de Lint Bibliography

Here's a listing of book titles as they first appeared under Charles de Lint's by-line and in a separate edition, along with their initial dates of publication:

DE GRIJZE ROOS, 1983 (collection)
THE RIDDLE OF THE WREN, 1984
MOONHEART, 1984
THE HARP OF THE GREY ROSE, 1985
MULENGRO, 1985
YARROW, 1986
ASCIAN IN ROSE, 1987 (novella)
JACK, THE GIANT KILLER, 1987
GREENMANTLE, 1988
WOLF MOON, 1988
SVAHA, 1989
WESTLIN WIND, 1989 (novella)
THE VALLEY OF THUNDER [PHILIP JOSE FARMER'S **THE DUNGEON** Vol. 3], 1989
BERLIN, 1989 (novella)
THE HIDDEN CITY [PHILIP JOSE FARMER'S **THE DUNGEON** Vol. 5], 1990
THE FAIR IN EMAIN MACHA, 1990 (Tor double)
DRINK DOWN THE MOON, 1990
GHOSTWOOD, 1990
ANGEL OF DARKNESS, 1990 (by "Samuel M. Key")
THE DREAMING PLACE, 1990
THE LITTLE COUNTRY, 1991
GHOSTS OF WIND AND SHADOWS, 1991 (novella)
UNCLE DOBBIN'S PARROT FAIR, 1991 (novella)
DEATH LEAVES AN ECHO, 1991 (Tor triple)
HEDGEWORK AND GUESSERY, 1991 (collection)
OUR LADY OF THE HARBOR, 1991 (novella)
PAPERJACK, 1991 (novella)
SPIRITWALK, 1992 [omnibus, reprints **GHOSTWOOD**; **ASCIAN IN ROSE**; **WESTLIN WIND**]
MERLIN DREAMS IN THE MONDREAM WOOD, 1992 (short story)
FROM A WHISPER TO A SCREAM, 1992 (by "Samuel M. Key")
DREAMS UNDERFOOT, 1993 (collection)
THE WISHING WELL, 1993 (novella)
INTO THE GREEN, 1993
I'LL BE WATCHING YOU, 1994 (by "Samuel M. Key")
THE WILD WOOD, 1994
MEMORY AND DREAM, 1994
THE IVORY AND THE HORN, 1995 (collection)
JACK OF KINROWAN, 1995 [omnibus, reprints **JACK, THE GIANT KILLER**, and **DRINK DOWN THE MOON**]

Forthcoming, Jan. 1997: **TRADER**

If you want to know the publishers, and subsequent/current editions, it's all listed on my webpage: http://www.cyberus.ca/~cdl

Cheers.

— Charles de Lint

The Results of the Cauldron

Stories:

- 1st Place: **"Neko's Dance" by Carol E. Leever**
- 2nd Place: **"Scandal" by eluki bes shahar**
- 3rd Place: **"Dragon-in-Law" by Connie Hirsch**

Artwork:

- 1st Place: **Vincent DiFate for "Dragon-in-Law"**
- 2nd Place: **Alicia Austin for "Neko's Dance"**
- 3rd Place: **George Barr for "Scandal"**

Congratulations to all the winners! To vote for your favorites in *this* issue, use the ballot on page 64. Your interest and enthusiasm mean a lot to us at *FANTASY* **Magazine.**

Ann Sharp Talks to Writers:

How Can I Write Sympathic Characters? (And Why Should I Try?)

What makes a fictional character sympathetic? A flaw, that's what. Classic Greek tragedies feature a hero or heroine with a "fatal flaw" that leads inexorably to the destruction of the character and half the cast. You don't have to do that, but a character flaw will add interest to your story if it's something that makes achieving the goal *more* difficult — a painfully shy person who, for some reason, *has* to make a speech. A cat who's a klutz.

What else? Problems. In a tightly-plotted short story, this is likely to be whatever calls for the difficult odds/own efforts. Your readers all have problems in their daily lives. Reading about someone who has a *different* problem is escape. Reading about someone with no problems isn't plausible. Don't overdo it, either. I heard the senior editor of Mills and Boon (Harlequin Romances) speak once, and she strongly suggested restraint: after all, if your heroine has been orphaned by a plane crash, lost her boyfriend to a blonde bitch and her job to a computer, and the bank foreclosed on the house mortgage — all in the same week — she'd be lucky to have enough presence of mind to cross the street without being run over. She wouldn't have enough spare energy to *notice* Prince Charming if he set off an atomic hand grenade. You generally can't, however, solve long-term problems (drug, alcohol, or other addiction, emotional problems, or incurable diseases) in a short story, though a secondary character might have the problem and hero or heroine might learn to deal with it.

Reading about someone who has a *different* problem is escape.

Does your character serve a purpose in telling the story? Helene Hanff used to write for the Ellery Queen murder mystery television show, which, due to budget constraints, allowed for five actors and some spear carriers. It wasn't long before the script writers reduced the actors to Ellery and his father (the regulars), the Corpse, the Innocent Suspect, and the Guilty Suspect. If your character doesn't serve a purpose, delete him or her; you don't have room in a short story for a cast of thousands — three is about the maximum.

Does each character have a real motive causing his or her actions? The Innocent Suspect needs a good reason to have done whatever lead to the suspicion, and the Guilty Suspect, obviously, needs a good reason to have committed the murder. Getting up on the wrong side of the bed is *not* good enough. The Corpse needs to be motivated to do whatever led to the murder.

Is he or she a real product of his or her world? If she's a woman warrior, or a mage, or a cook, do her speech and behavior reflect the fact? Does her spoken language match her station in life? If it doesn't in your first draft, review every word of dialogue and delete "got" and "gotten". Your character's socio-economic status will shoot up amazingly if she says "I have" instead of "I've got"...while you keep the action moving instead of laboring to make the point.

Does she spout off all sorts of theories for the reader's benefit, even though, presumably, the concepts of cultural anthropology and supply-side economics and Jeffersonian democracy are unknown to her? You may use what you know about these things to set up a problem or situation, but your characters are not you or God or Margaret Mead, and they have the limits you have given them.

Is he or she plausible? Have *you* done your homework about the things your characters *should* take for granted in their backgrounds? What about mountaineering, desert terrain, agriculture, estate management, housekeeping skills, everyday manners? If your story hinges on someone taking umbrage because of where they were seated during a banquet, read Emily Post or Miss Manners to find out where important (and insignificant) guests are placed. (Television sitcoms are full of bad examples about what constitutes good manners; don't perpetuate these.) MZB will be pleased if a story's submitted that makes use of authentic details of this kind. ("Makes use of" in this context means "uses to move the plot forward", not "drags in with a meathook just to prove you've read them somewhere.")

In the best tradition, the characters will soon be telling you what to do; but when you've written the story and are ready to fine-tune it, pay attention to sympathy, purpose, and realism. Good luck!

— Ann Sharp

ANN SHARP edited the *Darkover Newsletter*. This column is based on one written for *DNL* issue #40, but I chose it because Ann's comments are still relevant — and since Marion and I have rejected a number of stories recently whose characters were uninteresting or downright unlikeable.

— Rachel E. Holmen

DEBTS

by Laura Hewitt

The venom sloshed in the bowl. It was almost full, and Sigyn's wrists ached from holding it. Loki opened his eyes, his gaze sober. "Soon," he grunted, the half-healed scars on his face puckering painfully. "Not ... fair," he croaked wistfully. Another drop of acid, splashed from the fangs of the snake above, punctuated his words.

It was the first time he had uttered those words, although they had hung silently between them since the day of his binding. "No, it's not. Your own son..." She took a deep breath. Loki closed his eyes; he'd rather endure the venom than watch her tears. Although, he reflected dryly to himself, he'd probably sing a different tune when writhing under the searing torture of that venom.

There was a quiet cough at the end of the cavern. Sigyn's eyes widened; they had not heard another living voice in centuries. A shadow loomed, gradually shrinking until its owner waddled into view. It was a dwarf.

Sigyn spoke for her husband. "Who are you?" she demanded of the misshapen thing.

The squat figure grinned up at her. "I'm here to put an end to your husband's suffering," it said.

Sigyn stared at the dwarf coolly, skeptically. "My husband may not be unbound until the end of days. The thread of the Norns, the prophecy of Ragnarok binds more fast than even these chains."

"Aye," said the dwarf, "but I am of a line of great artificers, even among my people, and there are ways of mitigating even this punishment. For now..." He rummaged in a sack that Sigyn had thought part of his hunched body, triumphantly producing a tripod and bowl. "This will enable you to empty your bowl without letting the venom pain the shapeshifter further, and free you for other duties to him." The dwarf leered. Sigyn refused to blush. "I have a more permanent solution in mind, but I see your bowl is brimming, and you must empty it before it splashes."

"And your price?" asked Sigyn.

"Price?" replied the dwarf innocently.

"As if," drawled Sigyn, "any dwarf ever did anything not in his own interests."

The dwarf scowled. "Oh, you think your suffering is yours alone? When you shudder, the earth writhes. More sons of earth have died of your binding than ever suffered of your mischief. He who ends this would be a hero, rich beyond the imaginings of mortal men." The dwarf's eyes were far away. They glittered, reflecting dreams of...gold? Sigyn could not tell.

"You have not answered the question," she pointed out. "The enmity of the gods is a high price to pay for riches, and all-seeing Odin would repay you for this in such manner that no fame would comfort you on the plains of misty Niflheim."

The dwarf's eyes shifted. "There is the small matter of a debt between my family and one of Odin's family which will, I think, protect me. And yes, I will demand some payment from you and yours, but I will ask less than what is owed me. This I swear by all I hold precious."

Sigyn knew the dwarf was not lying; marriage to the Trickster had gifted her with the ability to know truth from untruth. Yet there was something he was holding back...

A drop spilled from the brimming bowl, searing Loki's face. He shuddered.

"What do you want?" she demanded bluntly, the time for bargaining being past.

"Only this: that you neither hinder me, nor permit any to seek vengeance when I ask my uncle's debt at last be paid."

"Done," shouted Loki before Sigyn could think. The dwarf swiftly set up the apparatus and bade her dispose of the contents of the now-filled bowl.

The dwarf puttered about, making measurements. "The crime you're being punished for... It's not murder. It's being better than them, and being a giant. They owe you...for the wall of Asgard, for Slepnir, for Mjiollnir, for your sacrifice and your cleverness, greater than any of them has given for his fellow gods, but you're a giant. You've pulled their fat out of the fire too many times, and their debt makes them uncomfortable. So they repay you with evil as great as the good you have done them."

Loki nodded thoughtfully. "Is that why you insisted I let you collect what is owed? Because I have saved those ungrateful brigands from their oaths so many times before?" It hurt to talk, but a kindred spirit was worth the pain.

"Actually, the solution I spoke of has much to do with that old debt. Long has my family toiled to fashion a blade that might cut you free." The dwarf produced a sickle and a crafty smile. He approached slowly, crouching over the glittering thing.

Sigyn's voice rang clearly, "First tell us of your family, and the debt they are owed."

The dwarf's eye's narrowed. "Faithful Sigyn is bound by her husband's word," he said with a scowl.

"Aye," she replied. "But I would know to what I am party, that I may know when I must not interfere."

"There was an old wager: two brothers competed for glory, and the victor could not take his prize without taking more than his due. I am here to collect that wager, for I am the son of his sister, and the wager was passed on when he died."

"Tell me more of this. What were the brothers' names? Surely the wager was not between them, for Odin is cousin to no dwarf. What was the wager? And who won?"

"My uncles strove to make wondrous things, and yea, though each created miracles that made the gods gasp at their splendor, he who commissioned them paid not for them, for he had promised his head to the one who made the greater marvel."

Loki's eyes widened in alarm.

"So you will ask for the head of a god? It seems most unlikely that that will turn away any wrath from Asgard. And why didn't your uncle collect when he won? It seems straightforward enough. If you need not fear the consequence of your collection, then surely he did not," said Sigyn.

"Alas, lady," said the dwarf, inching ever closer to Loki, "he was prevented by trickery, sophistry most vile, for he was told that although he might have the head of this evil betrayer, he might not have one part of his neck." Sigyn drew breath to shriek as she, also, recalled the tale he related. "But I, true to my promise, take less than what is owed me."

Swifter than thought, he raised the sword and cut off Loki's head just below the eyes, not touching the neck. "Thus I free you of your bonds and your punishment, Trickster. And thus I collect what is owed my family in the name of Brokk, my mother's brother."

Grinning, he bounded from the cave, intent on claiming his reward from Asgard. But all-knowing Odin regarded his foster-brother's slayer, and said quietly, "Hel remembers her father, who gave her Balder, who gave her life, and has let him wander from her realm. With the breaking of his bonds, you have necessitated the breaking of all fetters, and the end of days. Your reward shall be to perish in the wars of three winters, then again in the Fimbulvetr, and again and again until you have died once for every death your greed has brought about. For you have begun Ragnarok, the end of all days."

❄

Laura Hewitt writes, "I am a twenty-three-year-old woman, a cashier in the best darn bread store in Wilmette, no pets (my building won't allow them), and an ex-husband in the military). I am currently attempting to convince Uncle Sam to send me to college and studying for CLEP tests.

"Someday, I'd like to be an editor or a college-level English teacher. I help out friends with their work now (if I urge one more person to submit, I'll become an honorary dominatrix); my fantasy is that, while I will receive less gratitude for this from a professional standpoint, I will also receive less pieces where "11" is spelled with three el's." *[Fewer, not less , Laura. -- REH]*

Margaret Organ-Kean works as a systems analyst in addition to her artwork assignments from *MZBFM*, *Cricket*, and Wizards of the Coast (where she illustrated some MAGIC cards, and all the cards in The Great Dalmuti).

Artwork by Margaret Organ-Kean

New Leaves

by Syne Mitchell

"Things were different in the old country," Milligan told the three patrons seated at the counter of Deb's Deli. The diner smelled of burnt coffee, cigarettes, and bacon grease.

Rosie stood behind the counter. She flipped a cheese sandwich on the blackened grill and took another puff from the cigarette that lay on the edge of her coffee cup.

"Hmm," she said.

Milligan took that as encouragement. "The world was alive there, not dried up and dead like this city."

Tommy Harkins sipped his coffee. Without looking up he said, "Maybe the world ain't dried up, old man, maybe it's you."

Rosie gave Tommy a hard look.

"It isn't me," Milligan continued, "I thought of that. There were unknown places in the old country, a sense of wonder. It's the adventure that I miss."

"You want adventure? Try driving a cab up Forty-second Street after eleven, there's your adventure, old man."

Milligan's blue eyes were sad beneath his shaggy white eyebrows. "That's a known danger. That's just people. I'm talking about the unknown: about fairies and goblins and the little folk. They were quick and dangerous, unpredictable. A man had to keep his wits about him."

Rosie stared at Milligan. The grilled cheese smoldered on the grill. "You ain't gone back to the sauce, have you?"

Milligan spat. "No sense of wonder. That's what's wrong with young people today."

That was what was wrong with Sean, his son. What had happened to the bright-eyed boy?

Milligan remembered the day he taught Sean to look for fairy rings. It had been a fall day. Sean was four. The air smelled of apples and burning wood. Sean shuffled the red and gold leaves into tracks as he walked.

Milligan stopped short when he saw the ring. It was a perfect circle of white river stones. Inside the ring, the grass was green.

"Wha-sit?" Sean asked. He cocked his head. The morning light found the red in his hair.

"It's a fairy ring. See the stones? That's where the fairy folk danced last night."

Sean squatted down and studied the stones. He reached out a chubby hand towards one.

Milligan smacked his hand away. "No. If you set even the smallest part of you inside a fairy ring you'll be gone. Time runs differently there. You might only stay a moment but when you came out, your mother and I might be long dead."

Sean backed away. All the rest of the morning, Milligan watched his son scour the ground, bright eyes looking for the wee folk.

Now he was a contract lawyer in Raleigh. After Sean's mother died, Milligan couldn't bear to face the man

Artwork by Alan Giana

his son had become. At the funeral Sean had spoken to him of estate planning and affordable arrangements. Milligan never forgave him. They hadn't spoken in the five years since.

Milligan left a fiver on the counter, enough for breakfast and a tip, and ambled out into the crisp autumn air. He stared up at the gray colorless cliffs of the city's buildings. People, hunched against the cold, scurried past each other without speaking, without meeting each other's eyes.

"Is this what we have come to?" he asked no one in particular.

Beneath the asphalt and concrete, in darkness too deep for human eyes, they met.

"Is this what we have come to?" A thin, richly dressed figure stood in the center of the assembly. The crown of golden brown leaves vibrated on his head when he spoke. "A handful of sprites, four goblins, and a mangy troll?"

Forms large and small crowded together in the musty damp hollow under the earth. It was a cavern that smelled of nutmeg and rue, fear and secrets.

The rumble of the subway drowned out Harthorn's words. Underhill in the city was a noisy place. Harthorn folded his hands and waited for the screaming hulk of iron to pass. "No wonder the ones above no longer believe. How are we to scare them if we are so diminished? Where are my legions of faerfolk? Where are the others?"

Tatter-wing, a sprite, fluffed his oak leaf wings and shook his mangy puff of hair. "Eidelwild and Grumthur sitting in the park, chopped to bits by the big roarer-chopper buggy that eats the grass! Little leafs they pretend to be." The sprite zipped his hand across the air. "Zoom and thump! Eating and chopping and poor bits of fluff is all that is left!"

There was a groan of sympathy from the crowd.

"No one leaves the tributes anymore," whined Thistledown in a reedy voice. "No milk by the stoop. No little cakes for us. They have machines to help them now. Only Christmas, some cookies. I am so hungry."

"Too many cats."

"Sucked up was Eidermider! By big in-house sucking broom!"

The fairy king shook his head. "It seems that there is no place for us in the new world. Perhaps it is time that we too entered the dreaming."

"Maybe you, Harthorn. Not so for the others."

Harthorn looked up.

Jenks, the gremlin king, stood in the archway. His hair was slicked back and he wore a pin-striped suit. The wide smile he sported would have split a less flexible face in half. He held a gold-tipped cane in white gloved hands. Twisted bandy legs were concealed beneath well-tailored trousers. Behind him, in the darkness, swelled the ranks of gremlin kind. Harthorn's face wrinkled at the sight of the upstart.

"You were not invited."

The grin cracked wider — all sharp white teeth. "Gremlins thrive where they are unwelcome."

Growler, the troll, started to rise. Harthorn stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

Jenks continued. "My people flourish. Before we had only strings to tangle and clocks to break, now all of man's technology is our plaything."

Voices hissed from the darkness behind Jenks.

"Making car noises that stop at the mechanics!"

"Erasing information on discs!"

"Hiding car keys!"

"It is only, my fellow king, that you have not adapted to the times. We feed on frustration, you feed on fear and wonder. There is no more wonder in this new world. It is full of frustration."

Jenks licked his thin dark lips.

"Why are you here?" Harthorn's silver eyes glinted in the low light.

"I've come to save them," Jenks told Harthorn. The gremlin king turned. "Join me," he said to the band of fairies. "Harthorn's time is done. He cannot change — look at him. He's wearing clothes twelve hundred years out of date." A murmur passed through the small gathering. "You can find me at the airport, hangar thirteen."

Artwork by Alan Giana

"What of tradition? What of the old ways?" Harthorn asked them.

Jenks shrugged. "What of them? Adapt or die. Join me, or stay here and rot." He turned his back on the old king and strode away. He stopped, turned. Only his wide grin could be seen in the darkness. "And get some new clothes, too," he offered before blending out of sight.

The brownies sat huddled on the steps of the brownstone. It was their favorite place in the lands above. They were hidden by the withered leaves of a dead potted fern.

"What are we gonna do?" Dur asked.

"The king don't want change." Ansel complained.

"I haven't done a night's work in years." Tif rested her face on her fists.

"Nobody wants what we do," Dur said.

"We could follow the gremlin king."

"The gremlins scare me."

"Growler scares me."

"Yeah, but we know him."

"What can we do, that people want?"

"Cobble their shoes!"

"No. Everyone wears those soft-soled things, now. When they get old, just throw them away. Nobody needs fixers anymore."

"Everything's disposable."

"Like us — we're old, throw us away."

The brownies left Harthorn first. The inactivity of their present lives wore on them.

Jenks chuckled when he saw them. "I knew you'd come. Cleave, show them their new duties."

A gremlin with dark olive skin stepped from the shadows. Sharp claws ended his deft and long fingers. His skin was banded with black stripes.

He led Dur and Jen down to Rinson's Automotive Repair. The shop smelled of axle grease and beer. Cleave opened the red metal drawer of the tool box and pulled out a hammer. He placed it in front of the brownies.

"Weaken it." His voice was the hiss of a slow gas leak.

Dur sucked in his breath as he looked at the length of metal before him. "But this is a hammer, the auto-smith's most sacred tool. I cannot destroy what he toiled so long to craft."

Cleave pointed at small print on the handle. "It was made in Japan in a factory. Nobody crafted this."

Dur raised his tiny ax and let it fall again, "I can't."

The gremlin growled deep in his throat. "Useless." He flung the hammer against the wall. The sheet metal rang. "Hide them then."

Scared by the two-and-a-half-foot-tall gremlin, Jen and Dur hid the mechanic's tools.

The brownies rested beneath the tool box. They panted.

"This isn't right," Jen said.

"We should go back."

Jen nodded.

Jen and Dur left the auto-shop through a mouse hole. They met up with Ansel and the sprites. Together they went back. The cavern Underhill was empty when the fairies returned, Harthorn was gone.

Harthorn knew the moment the brownies defected, Underhill opening like a gash in his heart when they spilled out. They did not take his leave; he knew where they were going.

"It is ended," his words rang in the empty hall. His reverie was interrupted by an ancient tune. Harthorn opened Underhill and walked along an abandoned power conduit.

The conduit opened onto a sewer access. Harthorn followed the tune up to the surface. Standing on the ladder under the manhole cover, he saw her. She was wrapped in heavy winter clothing and had a hat at her feet. Her brown leather boots were stained and torn and she paused in her singing to warm her hands in her armpits. When the young woman sang again it was like cool water rushing into Harthorn's bruised heart. The strains of *Greensleeves* floated down to him.

Harthorn closed his silver eyes. He could almost see the court before him, as it was in the old days, the white lady pale and smiling at his side.

The woman stopped singing after the second verse. Didn't she know the rest? Harthorn thought of stealing her away. No. What artist or minstrel would want to come Underhill now, to the subway and sewers and rats?

There was no more beasts for the wild hunt, no more groves to dance in.

Harthorn traveled the sewer lines until he saw light from a drain far above. He jumped and caught the rim with his hands; then hauled himself onto the city street.

The night was brighter than he remembered. Colored lights flickered, advertising Michelob and XXX Videos.

Harthorn took a silver flute from his sleeve and put it to his lips. People walked past as he played, without meeting his eyes.

"Hey! Look at the fairy!"

Harthorn's eyes snapped open. How did they know?

Two youths stood in front of him. Their clothes were ill-fitting; their pants hung low on their waists, the crotch almost to their knees. One wore a short tunic with a painted tapestry that read "Metallica."

"You're on Red's turf. You're gonna play, you gotta pay," said the youth in the green hood.

"Red's?" Their words were as strange as their clothing. The knife that appeared in the boy's hand made his intentions clear.

Harthorn grabbed for his sword. It was underground, lying next to his throne.

The taller youth slashed at the fairy king's chest. Harthorn jumped back. The green-hooded youth tried to circle behind Harthorn; he rotated to keep them both in view.

The taller youth slashed again. Harthorn grabbed his wrist and stepped inside the other one's reach. He struck at the boy's face with his fist. Bones popped. Pain ran up Harthorn's arm. He staggered back clutching his hand. He had not struck a blow in over two hundred and fifty years.

The other boy's weight crashed down on him from behind. All three collapsed to the ground. Harthorn twisted his body and grabbed the hand that held the knife. He slammed it against the ground until the knife dropped. The younger boy grabbed for it. Harthorn got it. His reflexes were faster than the boy's.

Harthorn flicked the blade into the face of the younger boy. The youth jerked free of the pile and ran down the street.

Harthorn kneeled on the chest of the other boy. "I believe we have things to discuss," the fairy king said.

The brownies found Harthorn in the park, reading a newspaper. They almost didn't recognize him; he wore jeans, Reeboks and a Metallica T-shirt. Dark sunglasses covered his silver eyes.

Jen and Dur threw themselves at his feet. "We were wrong, Lord, forgive us."

Harthorn ignored them. He looked at his faer-folk. They gleamed under

the sodium street lamp, all twigs and leaves and silver skin.

"The gremlin king was right. We must change. This world is strange, but not without—" Hawthorn smiled, "—challenges. We must find the wonder in this world. We must adapt."

"Is not working!" Tatter-wing shrieked. "Ow-ow-ow-ow-ow!"

The two brownies on either side of the sprite exchanged glances. Dur said, "Hold still."

On the other side, Tif slopped more glue onto the sprite's wing with the oversized brush she held. It was as long as her four-inch stocky brown body. She had to lean back with all of her weight not to drop it on Tatter-wing.

Dur tore off another piece of newspaper. "Hold still," he said again.

"The city's not the same as it used to be," Mr. Milligan announced to the captive audience in Deb's Deli. "Something's changed. Something's gone hard." Milligan scraped spring mud from his shoes on the Astroturf doormat.

"Ah, you old timers are always talking about the good old days," Tommy Harkins said.

"In the paper it says muggings are up forty-three percent from last year," Rosie offered.

Mrs. Olsen clutched her white vinyl purse. "It's true, what you said. My Harold was coming home last Sunday when the biggest man he ever saw stopped him and took his wallet. It was strange, he said, the man was wearing a trench coat but his arms stuck out, like they were too long. They were hairy, those arms. My Harold said the man had teeth like a nightmare. They stuck out all like this." The old woman twisted her fingers in front of her mouth. "The man growled at my Harold."

"So your old man got mugged by some ugly palooka with a speech impediment, what of it? I've been driving cab ten years in this godforsaken city and what all I've seen would turn your stomach. Muggers always been, always will be."

Tommy's cynicism was the echo of Sean's. The words were plainer, less eloquent than Sean's would have been, but the feeling behind them was the same. Sean, for all his wealth, was no happier than a Brooklyn cab driver.

The atmosphere in the diner smothered Milligan. The garlic and grease of Rosie's lunch menu made the air thick. He wanted to be away, to figure out the meaning of the changes he felt. Milligan had Rosie fix his coffee to go and carried the Styrofoam cup to the park where he bought a paper. The bench by the recycled-tire playground was empty. Milligan rested his weight on the weathered wood. He smelled the wild daffodils scattered over the lawn. Soon the city would mow the park and they would be gone.

Milligan shook out his paper and sipped his coffee. A kind of fearful excitement was in the air. He had felt it this morning. It reminded him of when he was a kid himself, back in the old country.

He folded the paper to the crossword. There was a squeak. Had a mouse gotten into he paper? He smacked it against the bench. There was another squeak. Something fluttered to the ground. A three-inch high person, with wings that looked like torn bits of the *New York Times* pushed off from the ground. He shook his tiny fist at Milligan and fluttered away, tossing in the wind, like a discarded newspaper.

"I'll be —" Milligan looked around. He wanted to ask someone else if they had seen it too, but the park was empty.

Milligan saw his first fairy ring on Wednesday night. He stared at the luminescent ring of dots on the side of the fish packer's warehouse when Tommy Harkins drove up. He stopped the cab beside Milligan and leaned out the window.

"It's something, ain't it? Word on the street is that it's this new gang, 'The Goblins', doing it. They've been using glow-in-the-dark paint to mark their territory. Just what we need, more punks, eh?" The cabby pursed his lips.

Artwork by Alan Giana

"Kinda pretty, though."

Milligan didn't answer. He just stared at the ring.

Once he knew what to look for, the signs were everywhere.

He saw more newspaper sprites. Milligan never got close enough to see the little men, but he chased the fluttering scraps of paper down the gutter. The paper would wait until he had almost reached it and then be blown just out of reach again.

Milligan drank out of a water fountain that burbled and spit at him. He wiped off his face. Instead of walking angrily away like the other patrons, he stared into the stagnant pool around the drain in the bowl of the fountain. A ripple of pearly flesh darted under a decaying leaf. Milligan turned the faucet again and she came out, a tiny perfectly-formed pixie. She saw him and threw both hands over her face and hid. Milligan laughed and flicked the surface of the water with his forefinger.

The old folk started to keep an eye on him then. Milligan stopped walking alone at night if he could help it. One night he looked back and saw Mrs. Olsen's troll following him. The dark hairy arms hung out of the trench coat's brown sleeves. The troll walked with a deliberate rolling gait. Milligan ducked into an all-night florist shop. He stood shaking among the roses and carnations. When he ventured out, the troll was gone.

When Milligan got his W-2's back from the government he left them out with the 1040 forms and the instruction books and a ham sandwich and two twinkies. In the morning the food was gone. The tax forms were filled out in a precise delicate script.

The gremlin king returned Underhill to a whirlwind of activity. Sprites buzzed in the air like maniacal bees. Harthorn stood in the center. He wore black jeans and an emerald Shang-Tung silk blazer. He waved his hands expansively at the commotion. "You have failed," he said. "They will not join you."

"I haven't failed." The gremlin king smiled. "Sometimes things have to be broken before they get fixed."

The fairy king's eyebrow rose.

"You owe me one, fairy king." Jenk's Cheshire grin glowed in the darkness. He looked Harthorn's clothes up and down. "Not bad."

Artwork by Alan Giana

Then he was gone.

Milligan heard them singing, one night, like he hadn't since he'd left the old country. He was waiting in the subway, half-asleep. The voices started him awake. He pressed his ear to the wall. It had to be them. There shouldn't have been anything on the other side of the wall except hundreds of feet of dirt. Milligan heard their laughter.

It reminded him of the way Sean used to laugh when he was four, high and loud and unselfconsciously. Milligan recalled reading fairy tales to his blue-eyed son on those nights long ago. What had happened to them both? Milligan resolved to look up his son's number when he got home. Maybe even call.

❄

Syne Mitchell is currently living in a 1920's farmhouse in the middle of an orange grove in central Florida. "New Leaves" grew out of her childhood love of fairy stories and her hope that they will survive even when our wild places are destroyed in the name of progress. But then again, who's to say that a big city doesn't have its own wild places...

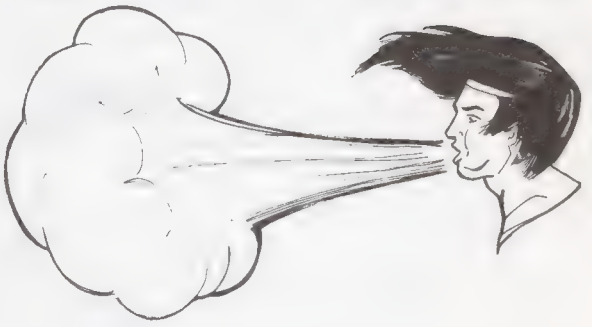
Mitchell has sold three stories to MZB's **Sword and Sorceress** anthology series. This is her first magazine sale. This summer, she traveled the country on a 10,000 mile epic adventure/book signing tour and signed her story in **SWORD AND SORCERESS XII**. Between signings, she tells us she tramped up and down the trails of national parks.

Alan Giana runs his own studio, Giana Illustration and Design, in Simsbury, CT. This is his first fantasy illustration in some time.

Vote for your favorites — Cauldron ballot on p. 64

Lesser-Known Myths of Greece #9: Maera the Minoan

by Marsheila Rockwell



Maera was a flippant woman-child of emancipated Crete, the daughter of a sailor (who bequeathed to her an acid tongue) and a former Bull Dancer (from whom she got her fearlessness). Blessed with dark eyes, flowing tiers of thick black curls, and the body of a runner, Maera did not lack for suitors. Many were the men whose eyes she caught; few enough those that could long endure her saucy lip. Indeed, among the local lads she was dubbed the Wingless Harpy, driven even from the company of her sisters on Mount Dicte for the tartness of her wit.

But a sailor's get meets many lads, and Maera did not care for the provincial boys of Crete in any case. Her eyes were set to seek afar, for the exotic and the strange, and anything familiar was, to her, beneath contempt.

Adventurous by nature and by choice, Maera spent her days on the docks of Knossos, listening to the wild tales of drunken Phoenicians. Of far Atlantis, where even lowly slaves rode great gray beasts with sails for ears and piercing ivory tusks. Of cold Albion, where hairy beastlike men worshipped trees and ate the flesh of their enemies. And of Beyond the Ocean, a gloomy land, home to the Titan Atlas, the fair Hesperides, and the dread Gorgons.

"I don't believe it," Maera scoffed one day, as a handsome blonde Phoenician regaled the tavern with stories of that last, most distant place.

He turned to regard her with sharp blue eyes. "Truly? And what portion of my tale rings false, lovely maid?" His gaze traveled the length of her, bringing a red stain to her cheeks and laughter to the crowd.

"Why, all of it, of course," she retorted, with a fateful flip of ebon curls. And then, because rebellious youth has never known when to leave well enough alone, she added, "Apollo himself could not lie so prettily."

"You dare?"

A crack of thunder split through the common room, and patrons fell to their bellies with frightened cries. The Phoenician stood limned with brilliant light, seemingly too tall to fit beneath the heavy ceiling beams. A crown of laurel leaves nestled in his thick blond hair, and a longbow and lyre were strapped across his back.

Maera paled and bit her lip, but stood her ground before the God of Truth and Music as the other, wiser customers began slithering towards the door.

"You doubt my tales of Beyond the Ocean, mortal?" His voice boomed through the emptying room, blowing hair and clothing about and causing the rafters to shiver. "Then you shall go there. Forever!" He raised his arm as if to make some irrevocable gesture.

"Wait! Wait, wait." Maera, for all her impertinence, knew this game well. A sailor's child, and that of a temple dancer, she had learned much of the Gods and their amusements. She held up her hands, palms out. "With all due respect, that's not how it works."

Apollo frowned, and the light dimmed a bit. He lowered his arm. Slowly.

"What do you mean?" he asked suspiciously.

Maera shrugged. "I've insulted you. The way I see it, you have four possible responses." She began ticking them off on slim fingers. "One: send some great monster to terrify my homeland until I agree to sacrifice someone dear to me. Two: turn me into something really loathsome until I've learned my lesson. Three: kill me. Or four: send me to Hades without killing me." She shook her head apologetically. "No, I think it's pretty clear. You can't just banish me to Beyond the Ocean. It's not in the rules."

Apollo's frown deepened, and the light faded to little more than a fireplace glow. He seemed shorter, as well.

"She's right, you know." Maera and the God turned to see a cuckoo perched atop a ceiling beam, smoothing her feathers.

"Stepmother," Apollo acknowledged reluctantly. The light was gone, and the God was just another Phoenician again.

The cuckoo turned a shiny black eye on Maera. "Hmm. This one's brighter than most. And impertinent. I think the monster punishment would be the most effective." The bird, impossibly, smiled, and Maera winced. Hera's dislike of

Artwork by Julia Lacquement

Zeus's Minoans was well known. "With one *slight* difference. Instead of sacrificing someone she loves, the monster will ravage Crete until she brings me a Golden Apple from my sacred grove. Yes, that should work beautifully."

Maera piped up, "I don't think so."

The cuckoo blinked at her, and Apollo hid a sudden grin.

"Taking a Golden Apple is cause for punishment in itself. Your proposal has me being punished twice, first for insulting Apollo and then for stealing from you. That's hardly fair." She appealed to Apollo. "Besides, it's *your* job to decide a punishment, not hers."

"So it is," the sunny God replied, beginning to glow again. "However," he amended, casting a wary look at the cuckoo, "my stepmother's plan does have merit. Instead of an apple from her tree, bring me a lock of hair from each of the Hesperides, and I will call off my monster."

The cuckoo trilled in agreement, and fluttered down to land on the Phoenician's shoulder. As they exited the tavern, Maera could hear them arguing.

"We can't use the Kraken, that's been done. Or will be. And Zeus would never allow us to visit a Giant Bull on *Crete*, Stepmother! Cyclops? Now, there's an idea ...."

The leave-taking at the docks was a solemn affair. A sullen crowd had gath-

Artwork by Julia Lacquement

ered to witness Maera's departure, its mood unpleasant. They were convinced her quest would fail, and were wondering if the satisfaction they got from killing her now would still be sweet when the Cyclops came to destroy them.

Luckily, they were still mostly undecided when Maera cast off. A few rocks thudded against the wooden hull of her small boat, and one narrowly missed her hand on the rudder. But Maera's parents waved farewell and, all in all, the adventure was well begun.

Maera aimed her craft west and let an obliging breeze blow her along as she tallied her supplies. Water for a month, if rationed, and twice that much of dry sea biscuits left her tiny vessel low in the water. A net lay curled near the single mast, ready to supplement her diet with Poseidon's bounty. Still, she would not last long on the open sea, especially with no true idea of where Beyond the Ocean lay.

But Maera was a clever girl, as most sailing daughters are, and she had formed a plan. Her journey would not begin, in truth, until she had made a brief stop.

At Delphi.

Maera's kin greeted her jovially when she arrived at Mount Parnassus. Descendants of the Cretan sailors Apollo himself had placed here to protect his Oracle (after stealing it from Gaea), these seamen-turned-shepherds were always happy to entertain their seafaring relatives, on the rare occasion of a visit. Maera shared a meal with them and spun tales of the wide ocean (some of which she borrowed from Apollo), lulling her kin to trust and sparking in them forgotten visions of the rolling waters they had never wanted to leave. Made maudlin by their bittersweet memories, the land-bound shepherds retired early, hoping to recapture images of lost glory in the solace of their dreams.

Which made it a simple feat indeed for Maera to steal several sheep while her relatives slept unknowing.

Dawn cast evergreen shadows over the rugged shoulders of Parnassus. Morning mist coiled around noxious fingers of smoke that rose from the area's gaping fissures. Coaxing her stolen sheep along with gentle words, Maera carefully made her way over treacherous ground to the rocky gorge that housed her goal.

As she rounded a bend and saw Apollo's temple, Maera pulled a woolen mantle over her black locks, completing her disguise as a simple shepherdess.

Priests appeared out of the sulfurous fog, leading Maera and her sacrifice inside, through dim caverns hewn by no mortal hand, to the Oracle. In a vast chamber, split in twain by a fissure that oozed yellow steam like a festering wound, sat the Pythoness. Perched precariously on the lip of the fissure, she wore flowing saffron robes that pooled beneath her and dripped sluggishly into the chasm. Her flesh was alabaster, bleached to corpse color by years of prophesying in the darkness of the temple. Even her hair was white, and the glint of gold glimpsed here and there could as easily have been tendrils of sulfur smoke as remnants of once-sunny hair.

Her eyes were open, but showed no color, as though she were blind, or half-asleep. When she spoke, sibilant whispers echoed weirdly off riven stone.

"What do you seek?"

Maera blinked twice, then plunged into her act.

"Great Oracle of Mighty Apollo, please accept this sacrifice of plump and tasty sheep, the best my herd has to offer." She pitched her voice low, and kept her eyes downcast, lest Apollo, through the sightless eyes of his Oracle, recognize her. She sensed movement as her escort examined the sheep she had pilfered from her slumbering kinfolk. Finding the sacrifice worthy, the priests led the unsuspecting, bleating animals away, presumably to some hidden altar.

"What do you seek?" the Pythoness asked again, a faint resonance deepening her voice. Maera shivered, knowing she stood once again in the presence of the God of Truth. Offering up a quick mental prayer to Hermes, who would delight in her planned deception, Maera began.

"Great Oracle, I am but a lowly shepherdess, unworthy of the notice of the Gods." She bit back a smirk at *that*. "I would not seek their help now, but I am in desperate need. A week ago, as I herded my sheep along the grassy slopes of Parnassus, my birth-time came upon me, months early." Maera hoped the extra layers of clothing she had borrowed would lend credence to the lie, though she doubted the heavy-lidded Oracle even saw her. But Apollo would, so her sweaty suffering was not in vain. She continued. "In my pain, I cried out for aid, so my child would not die. The wind God Zephyrus heard my pleas from on high and came down to assist me. But when my daughter was born, she was so beautiful that he stole her for himself, carrying her away where I, a mere mortal, could not follow." Her swiftly swallowed chuckle sounded like a sob — the perfect touch. Maera fell to her knees, burying her face in her hands.

"Please, Great Oracle, I beg you! Intercede for me to Mighty Apollo, who loves mercy as he loves truth. Please help me trap Zephyrus and get my daughter back!"

She knelt there, shallow breathing unfeigned as she waited for the God's reply. Apollo was a self-proclaimed enemy of injustice; this ruse was sure to work.

Or so she hoped.

As she waited, the sulfurous fumes crept into her eyes and nose, and soon she was crying in truth, using her mantle to try and filter away the worst of the stench.

"Apollo does love mercy, child of Crete." Maera glanced up quickly, then calmed when she realized the Oracle simply mistook her for one of her displaced kin. "Take your mantle and pass it through the God's breath." The Pythoness gestured blindly to the yellow vapors that whirled and danced on some unsourced draft. "Then go to the heights of Mount Parnassus and call Zephyrus by his fellow winds and King Aeolus. When he answers, place your mantle about his shoulders. Then he will be yours, and you can regain your daughter."

Maera made a show of thanking both Oracle and God profusely. She kept her head bowed as she waved the woolen mantle through layers of sun-gold smoke, just in case Apollo was still in residence. Then she was free, not quite running from the temple on her way to high Parnassus.

The climb was made more arduous by Maera's need to dodge her disgruntled relatives, who had awakened to find several of their prize ewes missing, along with their cousin from Knossos.

The sun was two fingers past its zenith when Maera reached the top of the peak, out of breath, footsore, and very thirsty. She melted handfuls of snow and lapped the icy water from her palms

like a dog. Then she washed her face, ran wet fingers through her unruly curls, and pinched her cheeks to give them more color. After a moment's thought, she stripped to her innermost layer of clothing, the short runner's dress she'd worn from warmer Crete. Secreting her extra garments behind a rock, she stood, mantle draped loosely about her shoulders.

Then, trembling with something more than cold, she summoned Zephyrus. She called the grave-cold North Wind, the gentle warm wind of the South, and the dry, harsh wind from out of the far East. As the winds swirled together, incoherent and violent, she bound them to earth with the name of Aeolus.

Then a figure formed in the midst of the whirlwind and Zephyrus stepped from the maelstrom. A dark-haired, pale-faced God, he smiled when he saw her.

"Pretty mortal lass. Why have you called me down from the skies?" His breath was moist and salty, stirring her hair though she stood yards away.

Maera gave him her most seductive smile and took a step forward.

"O Great Zephyrus," she murmured in a husky voice more sincere than not, "it is the dream of every mortal woman to be visited by the sweet God of the West Wind."

Zephyrus preened and his smile widened. "Truly? And why should I bless you, or any mortal, with my affections?" His tone was light and bantering, but his eyes shone and he too took a step forward. The other winds howled about him, but his own hair and tunic were undisturbed.

Maera lifted her chin in challenge, a movement that drew the wind God's gaze to the quick pulse in her throat, and beyond. "Come and see," she replied softly, and made as if to remove her mantle.

Zephyrus strode forward and caught her up in his arms. Battling winds whipped her hair into a black, frenzied froth and tore at her dress like wanton fingers. Maera clutched the mantle close, her hands fierce claws against the pull of the gale. And then, as the God lowered her to the snow, his winds slackened. In that moment, Maera threw her arms about him in an eager embrace, seizing both ends of the woolen mantle and pulling it over his shoulders.

The winds died completely and Zephyrus's face lost some of its lustful glow. "What have you done?" he demanded as Maera pushed away from him and stood, brushing off the tattered remains of her dress.

"I've captured you," she answered matter-of-factly, locating her hidden clothing and pulling on a few layers of wool against the sudden chill of high, frozen air on sweaty flesh.

Zephyrus tested the strength of the mantle, found he could not break the greater power of Apollo's magic. Then he looked at Maera and shrugged.

"Want do you want of me?" His voice held resignation, but no anger or petulance. Zephyrus was a fairly good-natured God, after all, as most sailors would readily attest.

"I want you to take me to Beyond the Ocean, and back again." As the God's eyes widened in disbelief, Maera continued, "*And* I want you to create a sea storm about Crete to delay the Cyclops until our return."

"I cannot," Zephyrus began, but Maera cut him off.

"You *can*," she countered, unsmiling. "The ocean skies are your domain. You *will*, or you will never dance in those skies again."

Zephyrus stared at her for a long moment, unused to being thwarted and unsure of the proper response. Finally he shrugged again. "Very well. I will do what I can, but I cannot ensure that such a storm would not itself destroy Crete. Nor can I harm the Cyclops directly if Apollo's ship breaks through the storm." Maera was not surprised that the sailor's Wind would know her plight — it must be on the lips of every seafarer on the known oceans by now.

"Fair enough," Maera replied, satisfied. She turned to begin the long trek back to her small craft (which she'd wisely beached far from the homes of her land-bound kin), signaling for the God to follow. Midway down the mountain, she stumbled on a rock and would have fallen, but Zephyrus was quick to catch her.

"Let me help you," he whispered in her ear, pulling her close. The light had returned to his eyes.

Maera shrugged him off with a shaky laugh.

"Flirt," she said, and kept walking.

With Zephyrus's aid, the journey to Beyond the Ocean took eight days. When they ran ashore on the murky sands of that mystical place, Maera turned to her no-longer-so-reluctant benefactor.

"Don't even think of leaving," she warned, only half-joking. Zephyrus grinned back at her and spread his hands in a charmingly innocent and completely false gesture.

"Who, me?" he asked, fluttering long lashes.

Maera snorted, grabbed up her fishing net, the only weapon she had, and headed for the dark hills she could just discern through the gloom.

As her figure dissolved into mist, Zephyrus settled into the boat with a briny sigh.

"Stay safe, little mortal," he whispered.

Maera found the Gorgons' cave easily enough. Contorted stones littered the path to the gaping darkness in the hills. As she faced what could well be her own personal entrance to Hades, the Minoan girl felt real fear for the first time. For a moment, she hesitated. But the faces of the people of Crete, throwing rocks at her as she left the docks, swam through her vision. Prominent among them were her mother and father. For them, at least, she would press on.

Hefting her net in both hands, Maera advanced.

The cave was dimly lit by intermittent torches, flickering in unfelt cross-breezes. Maera crept silently across the stony floor, stepping over petrified supplicants and dodging crumbling statues. The air was thick and smelt of dust. The red and orange flames cast a bloody tinge over the unrelieved pallor of stone.

As Maera peered over the shoulder of a beefy swordsman, frozen with his blow forever unlanded, she heard movement behind her. She stilled, listening.

There. A soft footfall. Another.

Closing.

A hand fell on her shoulder and Maera felt herself being lifted bodily from the floor. Her net fell with a *whump* at the swordsman's feet.

And then she was being turned, turned against her will as she struggled with all her mortal strength, heart beating terror-stricken at the cage of her ribs, to face the horror that was the Gorgon.

She caught a glimpse of writhing, mottled green, then squeezed her eyes shut against certain death.

She had one chance.

"Wait! Wait, wait ..."

# # #

The people of Crete never saw the Cyclops. For sixteen days, a ferocious storm beat at her shores, tearing trees from the earth and pouring oceans of rain from a swollen, angry sky. And suddenly, on the seventeenth day, the tempest abated, calming with unnatural speed. The wind-tossed waves were soothed, and soon became placid. From the west, a small craft approached.

Three figures sat in the boat, pushed inland by a gentle breeze. As the vessel neared, the dock workers saw a hooded form, a dark-haired youth wearing a mantle, and someone else ...

"Maera!"

Her father was the first to reach the craft. He pulled Maera up to the dock before the boat could be fully secured.

Maera hugged him tightly and graciously accepted the cheers of the gathering crowd. But before they could lift her to their shoulders and spirit her away to the nearest tavern, she turned to her two companions. She stepped back into the boat, and, whispering something to the youth, gently removed the mantle from his shoulders. As she did, a wind rose from the west, and the dark-haired man laughingly embraced her. He helped Maera from the boat, then turned its nose towards the open sea. With a strong wind springing up from the other direction, driving at their backs, the two were out of sight in minutes. As their figures faded into the distance, Maera, who was watching, saw them embrace, and smiled.

Artwork by Julia Lacquement

Then she let the jubilant sailors, glad they hadn't killed her after all, lead her to the closest cask of wine.

"... and that's about it."

Laughter filled the packed tavern as Maera downed another complimentary drink.

"But what about the Gorgon?" someone asked, and Maera chuckled.

"Well, we struck a bargain. She would stone the dragon that guarded the Hesperides — allowing me to borrow some of their hair, and also the Cyclops, who was detained by the storm, in exchange for a small favor."

"So what happened to the Cyclops?" someone else asked. Maera shrugged.

"Once he was turned to stone, Apollo's ship couldn't hold him. He crashed through several decks and the hull, and sank straight to the bottom of the sea. Apollo's galley followed soon after, though its skeleton crew got away safely enough." Except for the poor fool who had been slow to look away from the Medusa .... "Anyway, when the God appeared to find out what had happened to his monster and his boat, I gave him the locks of the Hesperides' hair." She shrugged again. "And that's about it."

"But what did you promise the Gorgon?"

Maera smiled to herself, and thought ruefully of Zephyrus, a lusty God too tempestuous for any mortal mate, gentle as he might sometimes be. And of the Gorgon, sitting alone in her far-off cave, waiting eagerly for visitors she could not help but turn to stone.

"Well, let me put it this way — can you imagine how hard it must be for her to get a date?"

❄

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JULIA LACQUEMENT's work spans a wide range, from hard sf to the softest fantasy, from Asian still life to horror.

All Blessings

by Erin Duggan

The news of the outrage spread throughout the Baghdad bazaar in whispers and gasps, so quickly that Sinem had time enough to scurry back to the carpetweavers' quarter before the men came.

"We are ruined!" she cried as she burst into her mother's stall.

Bilqis Zaidi laid down her shuttle, and the monkey Nabil screeched in surprise from her shoulder. "Calm yourself, daughter, you are speaking nonsense. Why should we be ruined?"

"Throughout the bazaar the rumors come, and the wazir's men surely follow: the magic carpet we wove for Mustafa Ali-Khalid (may Allah grant him many blessings) is ill-made! Useless! Mindless!" Sinem's eyes burned with starting tears and shame. "Nedjdiah had it from her sister, who dances for the wazir's guard captain, that we will be imprisoned, if not worse, and if not, what then? Who will buy a Zaidi carpet that cannot think?"

"Quiet, child, quiet!" Bilqis said crisply, and began to pace. "How can this be?" she muttered. "That carpet was your masterwork, and I watched every knot, heard every enchantment. I saw the wool spun and dyed with my own eyes. This cannot be possible."

Sinem wiped her dark eyes and steadied her voice, for she knew the wazir's men would be soon arriving. It would not do to show shame before them. "It is told that the dozar I made embarrassed the grand wazir in a procession this morning, before a great crowd. Thousands saw for themselves how a Zaidi carpet was unruly and headstrong. Even should we appease the wazir somehow, we will never have work again." Sinem took a deep breath and raised her chin high. "I have failed you, my mother and my masterweaver. The fault is all mine."

From the marketplace outside there came the sound of approaching guards with an eager crowd behind them, and Bilqis said urgently, "Listen to me, Sinem. When the guard comes you must say nothing, do you understand? Nothing. Leave me to handle this."

"They will take you away!" Sinem cried. "To the dungeons, or even the...executioner."

"Say nothing!" Bilqis insisted. "Do you want me to see you thrown in chains? You had nothing at all to do with this."

Sinem nodded weakly, and her mother smoothed her hair. "Good. Now, do not worry for me, Sinem. Everything you did was done well; I know it for myself."

"Yes," Sinem whispered, and then a guard wearing the grand wazir's badge strode into the tiny stall.

"Do I address Bilqis Zaidi, maker of magic carpets?" he asked pompously. "Then I imprison you in the name of the grand wazir, Mustafa Ali-Khalid (may Allah heap blessings upon him). You are charged with false representation of goods, thievery, treachery, and willfully causing injury to the person of the grand wazir (may he live a thousand lifetimes)."

Bilqis nodded her head respectfully. "Go to Sinem," she told Nabil quietly and held out her hands to be bound as the monkey leapt from her shoulder to her daughter's. Curious and astonished eyes peeped in the stall about the many carpets and rugs hung from the rafters, and despite her resolve not to shame the family any further, Sinem could not hold back a tiny whimper as Bilqis was grabbed roughly by the guards.

"And who is this? An accomplice?" the guard sneered, and he looked her gawky body up and down. "Maybe you should come with me for...questioning."

"She had nothing to do with this," Bilqis said quickly. "She is my daughter, and she knows nothing of weaving magic carpets."

The guard snorted. "And a good thing for her. You're already in enough trouble for two." He gave Bilqis a shove into the sunlight and the eyes of the crowd. "See how the wazir treats one who cheats his eminence! Let this be a lesson to all!" And with her head low and face uncovered like some hired dancing girl, Bilqis was marched off to the dungeons of Baghdad.

It was all Sinem could do not to cry as

Artwork by Lori Deitrick

she and Nabil fled the stares and murmurs of the bazaar for their home on the edge of the city. How could this be? All her life had been spent learning to weave magic carpets at her mother's side. Bilqis taught her daughter everything she knew of weaving, from the proper sizes and colors of carpets to the right enchantments to bind the spirits of air and wind to them, from the patterns which were suitable for a flying carpet to the most important secret of all, one known only to the Zaidi family, for they alone made magic carpets which could think.

This secret was first discovered by Sinem's grandmother just before Sinem herself was born, and slowly, for carpets could only be made slowly, the Zaidi name became famous in the marketplace. Bilqis told the story often to her daughter, beginning it so: "Carpetweaving is an art, daughter, and every artist must choose her patrons. We could have made the most beautiful magic carpets anywhere, but then our customers would be vain and petty. We could have woven the fastest carpets, but then thieves and outlaws would buy our bread. Instead we weave carpets smarter than any others, and now busy merchants and absentminded thinkers come to our shop. Is this not better?"

And so Bilqis was right, it was better, until the fame of their magic carpets, which needed no drivers and no guidance, spread even to the ear of the grand wazir, and now all was ruined. "She knows nothing of weaving magic carpets," Bilqis had said to protect her daughter, and as Sinem threw herself onto her cushioned couch in misery, she could only agree.

Evening fell and Sinem arose from her couch with renewed courage. She must know the whole of the story, she decided, to unknot this disaster, and who better than Arwa to hear it from? Arwa knew all that happened in Baghdad, so many cousins had she, and so many admirers, and so many idle hours. Sinem knew the gem merchant's daughter could not pass a chance for choice gossip, and sure enough, nearly before tea was ready, Arwa floated up like a cloud on a dozar spangled with golden threads.

After offering Arwa tea and pomegranates, Sinem begged her for news. "Where is my mother? Is it true she is in the dungeon?"

"Oh, quite true. She was brought before the grand wazir and could make no explanation for the faults of her carpet, and has been imprisoned indefinitely. Only the grand wazir's mercy saved her from torture, so says the chief executioner (who is married to the cousin of my cousin's brother-in-law). Too much poetry-writing has softened the wazir's heart—else, says the executioner, your mother would have been pulled apart by camels. She is a lucky woman." Arwa lay back into the cushions and offered a date to Nabil's greedy paws.

"My poor mother! But tell me, Arwa, what did the magic carpet do? Why does the wazir find it so embarrassing that he imprisons the weaver?"

"Ho!" laughed Arwa, and she sat up to avoid choking on a fig. "The carpet! How could he not be embarrassed? You Zaidi claim your carpets know the thoughts of the owner and need no guide, so well do they read their master's mind, but the wazir's carpet had no mind. In this morning's procession, the dozar shied from the kalifah's elephants, nearly upsetting the grand wazir (may blessings be upon him), then knocked over a potter's stall with its clumsiness, and finally would not pass a melon stall until beaten away with a stick! All knew the dozar was a Zaidi carpet, and the wazir knew all were wondering what thoughts were in his own head—is our grand wazir (may he never want all his days) an elephant-fearing, melon-gulping, lurching oaf? Of course your mother the weaver is imprisoned, and you should thank Allah she has not been put to death already."

Sinem bit her lip hard, and Arwa rubbed her hand gently. "How cruel of me to tell it so gleefully! Sinem, please know I wish no ill-luck on you or your mother."

"My mother did not weave that magic carpet," Sinem rasped. "I did. It was to be my masterwork, and then I would set up a stall beside my mother in the bazaar."

"Oh," Arwa said, surprised. "Oh, Sinem."

"I keep rethinking all those days while I wove at the loom, trying to think what I might have done wrong," Sinem whispered. "But my mother watched every moment, and she did not find any mistakes. We used the same farmers for wool as we have always used, and the same dyemakers. The same shuttle and loom, and a pattern used in carpets by other weavers. So why this? Why have I failed?"

Arwa's eyes narrowed in thought. "I know little of enchantments, but did you make the proper appeasements to evil spirits?"

"Always," Sinem sighed, and then rubbed her eyes with a trembling hand. "Arwa, what should I do to save my mother?"

"Tomorrow I will speak with my brother-in-law Ezzat, who has a cousin whose second wife is sister to the wazir's undersecretary's wife. Perhaps you can plead clemency for your mother, since, as they say, the wazir (may his heart never harden) is a softhearted man. I will do my best," Arwa promised, and gave Sinem a smile before she rose to leave. "One thing more though, if you will forgive a hardhearted rumormonger like myself—how is it your mother is charged with thievery?"

"Thievery?" Sinem asked, and then remembered the guard's words. The girl furrowed her brow. "I know nothing of this."

"I heard it was about Nabil," Arwa said, and the monkey looked up at his name.

"Ah," said Sinem nonchalantly, "Nabil's usual tricks. He pulled out a wisp of the wazir's hair. But the wazir stretches the law to call that thievery."

Arwa shrugged. "Who can say what is in the mind of a man who paces the night muttering in metered verse? Keep heart, Sinem, and I will send word to you tomorrow." And she was gone, not knowing how close she had come to learning the secret of the Zaidi carpets.

How her grandmother had learned this, Sinem did not know, but the secret of their carpets was not in the enchantments or knots or dyes, but in the wool. When Sinem was a tiny girl her grandmother put her on her knee to show her the thousands of knots in a half-made carpet, and explained, "Hair is thought, little one, you must know this if you mean to weave carpets with the Zaidi name. Hair is thought made solid, like ice from the mountains is water made solid. This is why women, who look into their hearts and think deeply, have hair which brushes their ankles, and men, who think only on business and politics, keep their hair short and begin to bald in their old age." And then she laughed and tickled the child's nose

Artwork by Lori Deitrick

with a wisp of her own graying hair.

So it was that merchants who came to commission a magic carpet were treated to tea and dried fruits and cakes, and kept talking until Nabil the monkey, or one of his predecessors, could flirt his way into the merchant's arms and grab a tuft of hair from the man's head to be spun along with wool for the carpet. The man's own thoughts would be spun and dyed along with the fibers from sheep, who, docile and dumb with a life of ease, had no thoughts at all, to make a magic carpet which already knew the owner's mind. Such a carpet would swiftly and carefully take its master around on his travels and errands while the master composed po-

ems, tallied accounts, or mused on the teachings of the Prophet. Except for the dozar which Sinem had woven for the grand wazir.

"Nabil, tell me my mother will come home again," Sinem said to the monkey, and Nabil rolled his eyes anxiously and tugged at her hair, for practice. He offered her a fig with his wrinkled fingers, but Sinem did not smile. "Soon you may be stealing figs and lifting purses in the bazaar, and I right beside you."

It was midmorning when a servant came from Arwa, bidding Sinem to arrive at the wazir's palace after zuhr to plead for her mother. Sinem trembled as she veiled herself, more thoroughly than usual, and made ready to leave after the noon prayer. But as she tried to leave the house, Nabil clutched her arm urgently and screeched so loudly that Sinem took pity on him and scooped him into the crook of her arm to take him along.

"Your nerves are jangled, and mine as well," she told him as the magic carpet fluttered along. "What shall I say to the wazir? All I can do is beg his mercy, accept the blame that truly belongs to me, and offer myself in my mother's stead. The tales say the wazir is a kindhearted man—at least Arwa's aunt's second husband's son's tales—and Allah will surely look well on my confession, will He not?"

But Nabil only fretted with the fringes of the carpet, and gave no answer.

The palace loomed before them all too soon, and after a few words with a disapproving sub-secretary (any relation to Arwa? Sinem wondered), the girl was ushered into a private office of the grand wazir, Nabil still clinging desperately to her shoulder.

The grand wazir was slumped dejectedly over a delicate table. His face was lined with troubles, and he looked like a man who woke with nightmares.

"Grand Wazir (Allah's blessings be upon you forever), Sinem Zaidi, daughter of the cheating carpetweaver, begs an audience of your most augustness!" boomed the sub-secretary.

The wazir did not even raise his eyes from his accounts. "The carpetweaver, eh? Very well." He waved his hand wearily. "You may leave us, with my thanks."

"At once, pinnacle of light!" The sub-secretary bowed deeply, sneered at Sinem, and closed the office door.

The wazir sighed and rubbed his eyes. "Please forgive him. He is a necessity of our bureaucracy, I fear. Now, you are daughter to that carpetweaver who so embarrassed me before all Baghdad, is that so?"

"Please, Grand Wazir (blessings of Allah upon you), that is not strictly true. My mother did not weave the magic carpet you speak of," Sinem said in a trembling voice. "It was I, and I have come to plead with you for my mother's freedom, with my own as ransom."

The wazir grunted. "A noble gesture. However, I am now the laughingstock of the city, may a pox be upon its tax collectors, and the kalifah himself (may all blessings be upon him) is embarrassed by this incident with his most important appointee. Rumors are flying, and I may be forced to execute you both merely to save face."

Sinem paled.

The wazir went on. "But since you are the weaver of that cursed rug, before we discuss that matter, perhaps you can tell me why the carpet failed. Your mother swears the work was not purposely marred."

"No, it was not," Sinem said bravely. "I do not know why, Your Eminence. I have scoured my mind with remembering and thinking, and still I know not...." Her voice trembled as she thought of her mother, and the grand wazir looked up from his papers for the first time.

With a wail the wazir leapt from his seat. "That monkey!" he groaned. "You've brought that horrible monkey."

"I'm so sorry," Sinem gasped, and as she tried to disengage him, Nabil began to shriek. "Hush, Nabil! Go with the guard!"

The monkey at last released her robes and grabbed onto a guard's hair as he was taken from the room.

Sinem began to babble desperately. "Please accept my apologies, Your Eminence. I did not realize you disliked him so."

The wazir settled onto his stool again. "I'm sorry. I don't dislike animals, but that monkey bears me no love," he said heavily. "When I came to commission the rug he ruined my third-best wig."

"Wig?" Sinem whispered. "You wear a wig? And where does the hair come from, please, Your Eminence?"

"I don't recall. Snow-goat? White tigers? Something itchy," the wazir said irritably.

"Snow-goat," said Sinem, and thinking of the carpet at the melon stall, began to laugh crazily.

"You dare laugh at a man who holds your life in his teeth?" the wazir roared, and he drew himself up, for the first time looking like a wazir.

"No, Your Eminence, not at all," Sinem cried, and stilled her relieved laughter at once. "But in the illuminating presence of your wisdom, I have realized why your carpet was faulty," she said. "If you and I may speak alone, Your Eminence, in strictest privacy, perhaps we may reach an agreement which may free you from Baghdad's tax accounts and my mother from its dungeons."

The wazir cocked his head and ordered the guards from the room, and had four spies cleared from the walls and cabinets as well.

The next morning found Bilqis and her daughter in the carpetweavers' quarter of the bazaar, surrounded by eager customers and gossips.

"The wazir's thoughts were so great no amount of magic could hold them," a silversmith whispered to a candlemaker. "Who can fathom the mind of a poet?"

"Personal poet to the kalifah, I heard!"

"Every bookseller in Baghdad is clamoring for an exclusive license."

"Three years for a dozar?" a silk merchant cried to Bilqis.

"I am sorry," she answered, "but we have orders from the kalifah himself for magic carpets for his greatness and each of his wives. As well as an order for a simple prayer rug from the former wazir, Mustafa Ali-Khalid."

From the next stall, Sinem looked to her smiling mother and grinned. "May all blessings be upon him!" she said, and laughed.

❄

Erin Duggan lives in the Chicago suburbs with her husband and a large black dog. She notes that her career highlights are "the usual Generation X hodge-podge of bartending, waiting tables, and clerking." She is working on a novel.

Lori Deitrick has been published in *Aboriginal Science Fiction Magazine* and *Amazing Stories Magazine*. Her fantasy originals have won numersous awards and grace the walls in the homes of many collectors.

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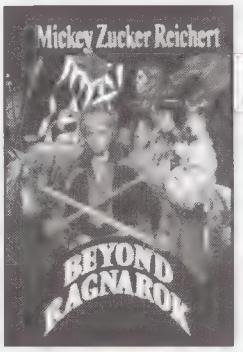

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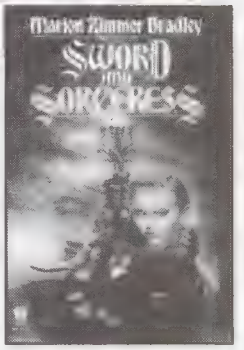

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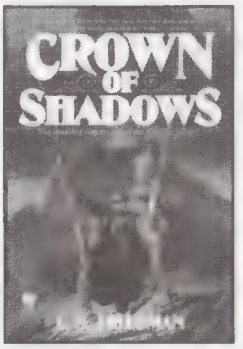

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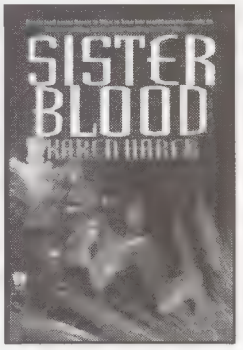

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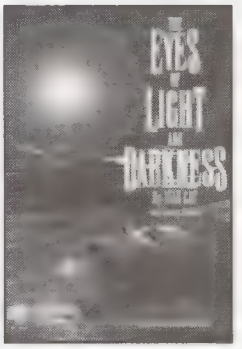

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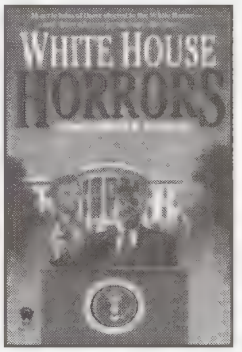

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Letters

Tony Colatruglio, Delaware OH

Being that I'm a new writer, I'm always looking for sound professional advice about the crafts of writing and storytelling. I was so inspired by the editorial piece "What is a Short Story?" that I am writing to find out if it is possible to purchase reprints of other "Marion Zimmer Bradley Talks to Writers" columns that have appeared since the publication of *FANTASY*.

The only way to do it currently is to buy back issues of the magazine. (Most of them are still available — see the order form elsewhere in this issue.) I suppose it is possible that someone may want to publish a collection of them some day, but there are no current plans for such a project.

—MZB

There are, however, two volumes of our fiction available from Warner.

— REH

Joseph M. Erhardt, Richmond VA

Thank you for the rejection you sent me that said in part, "I'm sorry, I found the events in this so preposterous that I could not believe in them, or even suspend my disbelief long enough to believe in them for the duration of the story. To suspend one's disbelief does not mean hanging it by the neck until dead."

I know you meant this seriously, but I had to laugh. It's been a while since someone nailed me with a zinger of such delicacy.

I would, however, like to remind you of one thing. You and your publisher produce a well-known, family-oriented fantasy magazine. That means you have kids and writers just getting their feet wet submitting to you — writers perhaps just daring to submit and awaiting their rejections with palpitations and dread. Writers who, upon reading such commentary, might never set finger to keyboard again and wind up leading far less fruitful lives.

I mean, what will you tell a 15-year-old about his or her story? That the plot's trite, the grammar rotten, and the story fit only for wrapping fish and lining bird cages?

If you know you're trading repartee with a seasoned submittor, that's one thing, but you certainly didn't know I was one; nor do you, I'm certain, know most of your submittors. Therefore I suggest you reshelve, at least for a time, your copy of **DOROTHY PARKER'S GUIDE TO CHARM**.

I am well aware that many of my submittors are young or beginning writers. I'm proud of the number of established writers who made their first sale to me — a few of them when they were quite young. But I never treated them differently from the established writers. My rejection letters may occasionally be blunt, but I don't believe any of them are nasty. It does an aspiring writer no service to beat around the bush about my reaction to a story. If they discourage that easily, they don't belong in the field. They will have to deal with far worse than me; that may be harsh, but it's true. By the way, I'm glad you enjoyed the "zinger" — it was *meant to be humorous.*

—MZB

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The Last Word

As usual, finishing up an issue is hectic. Marion is writing comments on the stories for the table of contents, Lisa is on the phone to the post office, Margaret is scanning artwork, Raul is trying to coordinate schedules so the car will be here when I'm ready to take everything to the printer, Heather is re-checking the printout to see if we've forgotten anything, I'm trying to remember all the details of what's not finished yet.

Most of the staff plan to be at the WorldCon in Los Angeles at Labor Day, so look for us there - I *think* we have a dealer table, and we'll probably have a panel of covers in the art show as well. Later in the fall, Marion plans as usual to attend the Darkover convention on the east coast at Thanksgiving.

We hope to have a new issue ready by the WorldCon, with a cover story by Karen Anderson and artwork by Margaret Organ-Kean. Other stories in issue #33 will be by Kathleen Massie-Ferch, Jo Clayton (not an Arakney story; something new), Julia S. Mandala, Ardath Mayhar, and Steven Piziks.

Last month I went to WisCon, a feminist science fiction convention. I had no idea what to expect: would they consider Marion's work or the magazine too trivial? In fact, many of the attendees had read lots of Marion's books, and I gave away two shipping boxes full of issue #31 (all I could bring on the plane with my baggage) as fast as I could hand them out. The panel discussions were fascinating, and the general tone was pretty amazing. In spite of the attractions of Madison's restaurants and farmer's market, I had so many fascinating conversations at the con that I never once left the hotel. At most conventions, I avoid the panels. At WisCon, I went to as many as I could; all were fascinating. There were probably eight women for every two men, another change from the usual convention atmosphere. Marion even said she wants to attend next year. The attendees were international, from Britain to Australia to the Far East. If there's interest (write to us!), I will publish the reading lists from some of the panels in a future issue.

One book in particular to look for is an anthology of women's fantasy writing from Australia, edited by Lucy Sussex. The cover shows St. Martha, patron saint of housewives, killing a dragon. (Unfortunately, I don't recall the exact title, but if you can't locate it or have it ordered for you at your local specialty shop, contact Lucy in email and I'm sure she can provide the full info: lsussex@netspace.net.au.) The convention had many fine moments, but my favorite was Ellen Kushner leading the former guests of honor, in song and Rockettes-type dance, singing "There Is Nothin' Like a Dame". All in all, WisCon 20 was one of the best conventions I have ever attended (and surely I've been to fifty by now), and Jeanne Gomoll and her committee deserve congratulations.

— Rachel E. Holmen

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Story	Artist
❑ **Fox Maid's Travail** by Jo Clayton	❑ Nicholas Jainschigg
❑ **Raven** by Raul S. Reyes	❑ Alicia Austin
❑ **Olivia's Chapped Lips** by Temple Dalton	❑ George Barr
❑ **The Little Pink Worm** by Dorothy J. Heydt	❑ Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk
❑ **Eighty Shen** by Carrie Martin	❑ Michael Kucharski
❑ **Debts** by Laura Hewitt	❑ Margaret Organ-Kean
❑ **New Leaves** by Syne Mitchell	❑ Alan Giana
❑ **Lesser-Known Myths of Greece #9: Maera the Minoan** by Marsheila Rockwell	❑ Julia Lacquement
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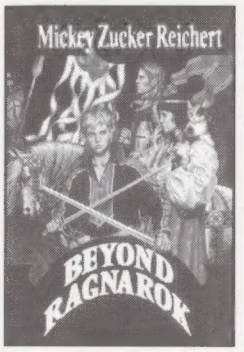

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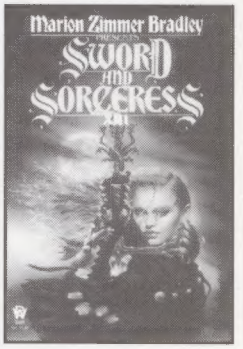

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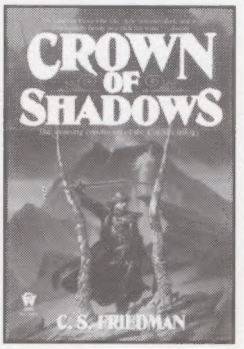

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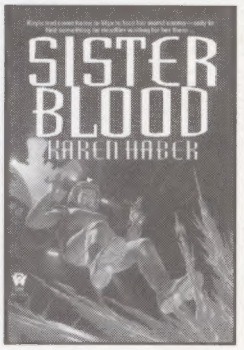

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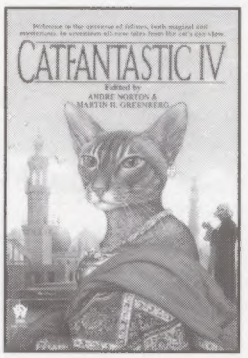

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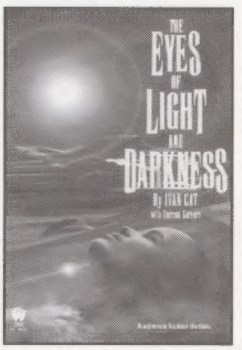

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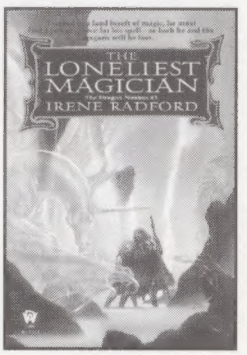

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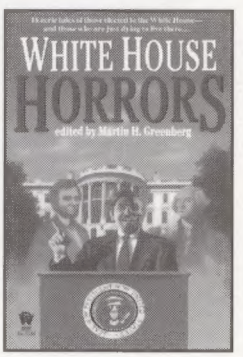

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